The (R)uses of Poetry: A Study of the Work of Robert Henryson in the Context of Scholastic Literary Theory

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Abstract

The work of Robert Henryson constitutes a sophisticated critical engagement with Scholastic literary theory, embodying a deep commitment to the priorities dictated by that theory while attending closely to the problems which it presents. The works of St Augustine and other medieval thinkers provide the theoretical background to the suspicion of poetic discourse which recurs throughout Henryson's works. The common accusations that poets are liars and rouse the passions, which lead in the earlier Middle Ages to a minimising of the authority which attaches to poetic discourse, are founded on a consideration of how such writing destabilises meaning in resisting assimilation to a referential model of linguistic signification. Comparative analysis of the exemplative theory of Averroes and the interpretative strategies of allegoresis illustrates that the affective literary theory of Scholasticism positively reappraises literature by making it conformable to a referential view of language. Developments in late-medieval philosophy which produce a tension between Scholastic theory's idealising and affective emphases result in modifications of that theory among vernacular writers which exploit its transformative potential, as exemplified in Dante's *Commedia*. Henryson's work similarly enacts a process of critique and modification of Scholastic theory, providing a particularly flexible and critical deployment of its resources. The patterns of disjunction which occur in the *Moral Fables* are organised around the need to define a model of signification which closely addresses particular circumstances without having the destabilising forces of textuality undermine the ideal basis of meaning. Henryson's work both posits and criticises a range of literary solutions to the problems. New concepts of authorship which Henryson introduces, while suggesting affiliations with Renaissance humanism, are couched in terms which show that they derive from and modify Scholastic theory. *The Testament of Cresseid* employs these concepts in developing a perspectival mode of signification which encompasses the idealising and particularising imperatives of Scholastic theory but which is in turn problematised by the *Fables*' depiction of the limitations of human vision. Henryson's treatment of rhetoric and social injustice in the *Fables* displays a traditional concern over literature's inefficacy in producing reform which is for him exacerbated by the crisis of representation which sees actual reality and ideal moral norms divided. For Henryson, moral and social problems are also problems of semiotics with the epistemological status of literary signification at their core. The diverse positions adopted in his work are structured by interpretative problems and imperatives which derive from Scholastic theory.

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Declaration

I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

Contents

Chapter One

Rei per Signa: Medieval Language Theory and the Early-Medieval Suspicion of Imaginative Literature

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> Cum subito raptus in spiritu, ad tribunal judicis pertrahore [...]. Interrogatus de conditione, Christianum me esse responsi. Et ille qui praesidebat: Mentiris, ait, Ciceronianus es, non Christianus; Ubi enim thesaurus tuus, ibi et cor tuum.
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> (St Jerome, *Epistola* XXII[1])

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In his introduction to *Medieval Theory of Authorship* Alistair Minnis comments on the consistency of Scholastic literary theory while at the same time emphasising the fact that it is a system which is constantly developing[2]. In this he focuses on an issue which is central to any discussion of the development of literary attitudes in the Middle Ages: to what extent can one assume a continuity within medieval perspectives on literature when it is clear (as Minnis' book illustrates) that these perspectives contained considerable variety and underwent much modification? This in turn invites one to ask how, given the plurality of possible theoretical positions, medieval intellectuals could maintain that sense of the homogeneity of thought which is so characteristic of them. Yet that they did so to a remarkable extent is clear from, to give one example, the criteria used to evaluate a text's *auctoritas*. As Alistair Minnis points out, 'to have "intrinsic worth", a literary work had to conform, in one way or another, with Christian truth; an *auctor* had to say the right things'[3]. Given that the numerous *auctoritates* available spanned a vast range of theoretical positions, from Augustine to pseudo-Dionysius to Aquinas, it is hard to see how the required degree of

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1. *Epistola* XXII, in *Patriologiae Cursus Completus Latinae* (henceforth *PL*), ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-64), 22, 394-426, xxx (col.416). (References to *PL* are to volume and column numbers, respectively.)
2. A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), p.2.
3. Minnis, *Authorship*, pp.10-11. See this section also for a discussion of the significance of the terms *auctor*, *auctoritas*. Basically an *auctor* was a writer judged worthy to be given credence. An *auctoritas* was an excerpt from such a writer's work, while the same term could also mean the quality of authoritativeness attached to author and text.

concordance could be derived. Why does this plurality not lead them to a conscious sense of thought as heterogeneous, disrupting any sense of an overall unity?

An explanation for this may perhaps be found in the medieval view of the structure of thought. Jacques Derrida, in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'[4], describes the concept of structure which, until recently, has characterised thought on such matters:

> Structure - or rather the structurality of structure - although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure [...] but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. [...] As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. [...] Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. That is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and *outside it*. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*.
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> (pp.278-279)

This brings to mind that moment in the *Paradiso* where Dante perceives the spiritual structure of the universe as a series of concentric rings with God as a point of light at the centre[5]. This spiritual reversal of the universe's spatial ordering can be seen as embodying the view of structure outlined by Derrida and emphasising its importance to medieval thought. The divine essence is outside and independent of the plurality and mutability of the temporal world. But at the same time it provides a centre around which the contingent world circles, and in which its temporal contradictions and uncertainties are resolved.

In the same way, the particularities and individuating elements of medieval thought are ultimately traced back to a unified truth in which all thought comes together in harmony. Thus, Jesse M. Gellrich remarks that although medieval grammatical theory touches on potentially

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4. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp.278-293.

5. *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), *Paradiso*, XXVII, 16-78.

disruptive aspects of language, such as the view of the relation between signifier and signified as conventional, these are subsumed within the service of a wider exercise:

> Signs and signification, as they were explored in *grammatica* [...] and in the hermeneutics of Scripture, remain committed to a wider intellectual preoccupation with stabilizing the sign, and tracing utterance back to a fixed origin, such as the primal Word spoken by God the Father.[6]

The varying intellectual positions which occur in the Middle Ages may in this way be seen as pertaining to a wider exercise aimed at perpetuating a dominant view of the structure of thought. Modifications and differences in thought have their centrifugal influence reduced by being part of an intellectual exercise which propagates the idea of a centre to which they are anchored but which is itself independent of them, not being subject to the processes of variation and transformation which characterise the particular structures of thought which it governs. The concept of such a centre, by virtue of the appearance of stability which it lends, limits the scope for disruption implicit in the range of particular theoretical positions.

Thus, in the preface to his *Sic et Non*, Peter Abelard (d.1142) expounds the view that differences and inconsistencies between *auctores* could be legitimately examined in order that the *auctores* can be reconciled in a common relation to ultimate truth[7]. In this way difference is seen as not calling into question the unifying and validating existence of a centre which informs the writings of all *auctores*, but rather any subversive effects such difference may have are absorbed by the certainty of such a common end, whose truths different writers express in different ways. What is more, while this certainty in a common centre allows Abelard to examine the particular causes and motivations which produce differences between *auctores*, it also, and perhaps more typically, allows other thinkers to underplay such differences by emphasising this shared central focus. Thus, in citing an *auctoritas*, medieval writers will strive to make the thought of their *auctores* accord with their own, and in doing so will quite happily produce the most radical departures from what those

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6. Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology and Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) p.21.
7. *Sic et Non*, *PL*, 178, 1339-1610, prologue (cols 1339-49).

auctores actually wrote, with no obvious sense of incongruity[8]. This is done in the apparently secure belief that the agreement which they have created constitutes not an abuse of the individuality of their *auctor*'s thought, but a resolution of merely seeming difference within a unified store of meaning. Such resolutions and accommodations of difference are made possible by a belief in the central unity of thought, and serve to perpetuate that belief.

Derrida has suggested that such a concept of structure has characterised Western philosophical discourse throughout its history[9]. But literary (and specifically poetic) discourse problematises this concept of structure in that its foregrounded artificiality tends to announce its status as a construct, and hence to deny its attachment to any stable and discernible prior reality. This undermines any attempt to assign meaning an external origin, and instead emphasises its textual, interpretative nature. It is, I believe, in response to the resistance of poetic and fictional writing to the perpetuation of the centrist view of structure that the most distinctive and characteristic features of medieval literary theory are manifested[10].

In later chapters it will be demonstrated that Robert Henryson's work expresses an anxiety over the disruptive nature of poetic signification which derives from concerns such as these. It is the contention of this thesis that Henryson's anxiety, and the varied literary strategies which he adopts in seeking to alleviate it, are shaped and motivated by a profound engagement with the exegetical protocols and imperatives of Scholastic literary theory. The Scholastic approach to imaginative writing constitutes a thoroughgoing containment of its destabilising elements. But subsequent developments in the intellectual climate of the later Middle Ages problematise the assumptions and strategies on which that containment depends. An awareness of this context casts considerable light on the literary ideals towards which Henryson strives, and on the inadequacies which leave him dissatisfied and spur him to further creativity.

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8. See the remarks later in this chapter on Aquinas' treatment of St Augustine (below, pp.15-16).

9. See Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play', p.278. Also *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp.10-26.

10. An interesting discussion of these issues is provided in Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.46-55.

But before outlining the defining features and ramifications of Scholastic literary theory, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the suspicion towards literature on which it is founded and which its definitions and protocols seek to dispel. Accordingly, this chapter will look in some detail at the wariness with which early-medieval thinkers regard imaginative writing, showing this to derive from a clear awareness of how such discourse challenges the referential assumptions which underlie medieval thought on language. The early-medieval context defines for the Scholastics the conditions which must be met if poetry and fiction are to be positively approved, and thus clarifies the ideals and the doubts which structure Henryson's work.

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An important strand in the thought of St Augustine (d.430) is his meditation on the relationship between human words and the divine Word. This is exemplified in a passage from his *Confessiones*[11] where he states that the mind

> comparavit haec verba temporaliter sonantia cum aeterno in silentio Verbo tuo et dixit: aliud est, longe aliud est. Haec longe infra me sunt; nec sunt, quia fugiunt et praetereunt. Verbum autem dei mei supra me manet in aeternum.
> (Bk XI, ch.vi, col.812)

The contrast here between Word and words centres on the eternal and unchanging nature of the former, as opposed to the transience of the latter. The implications of this are clarified in the reference to human language in the plural form, whereas the divine Word is seen as singular. What this points to is the totalising nature of the Word: its singularity testifies to its intrinsic connection to and simultaneous containment of all of reality:

> Et ideo Verbo tibi coaeterno, simul et sempiterne dicis omnia quae dicis, et fit quidquid dicus ut fiat; nec aliter, quam dicendo, facis: nec tamen et simul et sempiterne fiunt omnia quae dicendo facis.
> (*Conf.* Bk XI, ch.vii, col.813)

Within the framework of the creation myth the Word is the ontological source of its referent, and so Word and being are intrinsically

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11. St Augustine, *Confessiones*, *PL*, 32, 659-868. For an interesting and sensitive discussion of Augustine's attitudes towards language and reading, see Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

connected. Apprehension of the divine Word, which is the source of being, would therefore constitute a comprehensive and direct perception of the complete order of reality as contained within the framework of the divine *ordo*. The Word cannot be plural because it generates and contains all things, and there is nothing other than itself to which it can be added. This concept of the divine Word validates an absolutist view of the universe, where the univocity of reality is affirmed and where all things form part of one theocentric structure[12].

Such a view is also embodied in Augustine's views on the relationship between time and eternity[13]. His distinction between perpetuity, defined as history experienced by humans as a series of transient moments, and eternity as a single divine moment comprehending all of history, exemplifies the typical medieval view wherein disparate elements of reality are all contained within a unified universal framework. The idea of the divine Word, with its comprehension of all creation within a single atemporal impulse from the mind of God, is born of the same tendency to incorporate the diverse particulars of reality into a consistently meaningful whole.

However, as Augustine points out, human words are very different. He is aware that human language is steeped in temporality, in fact depending on it for its capacity to communicate:

> Non enim erit totus sermo si unum verbum non decedat cum sonuerit partes suas, ut succedat aliud. [...] Et non vis utique stare syllabas, sed transvolare, ut aliae veniant, et totum audias.
> (*Conf.* Bk IV, ch.x-xi, cols 699-700)

Augustine here outlines a model of communication in which language is envisioned as mediative in that it conveys an idea from the mind of a sender to that of a receiver. However, he seems aware of aspects of language which may complicate the communication process, preventing it from being merely a simple transference of ideas. This can be seen in the distinction between meaning as it exists complete and unified in the sender's mind, and its linguistic formulation. Whereas the idea exists in the mind as a totality, comprehending the objects of the mind within a unifying vision, its expression in language disrupts that unity and disperses meaning across temporal utterance. This much is clear from

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12. For a clear outline of the dominant medieval world view, see C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1964).

13. See *Conf.*, XI, x-xiii (cols 814-16).

the distinction between the singularity of the whole of what he has to say and the plurality of the syllables which make up its linguistic expression. The conception of language implied here is also a corollary of the standard medieval view of linguistic signification as being a product of convention, (a view which Augustine shared[14]), which necessarily involves a sense of a breach between language and its desired referent. Thus, in the process of mediation, language is seen as unable simply to present a meaning in its totality, instead exerting a centrifugal influence as it disperses unified comprehension through time across linguistic forms.

In this respect human language deviates from and potentially disrupts the totalising view of reality which, as I suggested above, is validated by the concept of the divine Word. Language's organisation as a linear structure composed of a system of parts tends to present its signified in such a way as to undercut any neat sense of unity and cohesion therein. Thus, the multiplicity of its structural elements seems to announce language's independence from any prior reality which can govern its signings and stand as an ontological basis of meaning. This potentially threatens any attempt to propound a view of all meaning being contained within and validated by a theocentric unity which transcends contingent limitations.

And yet, it is quite clear that writers in the Middle Ages were not overly perturbed by the threat which language posed to their conception of the relation between meaning and reality. Indeed, the prolific writings propounding such a homogenising view testify to this effect. The position which perhaps comes closest to questioning the referential power of language is the Dionysian *via negativa*, wherein humanity's incapacity to know or represent the transcendental divine is emphasised, and the best that can be done is to represent it by what it is clearly not[15]. The obvious difference between the imagery used and what that imagery refers to thus serves as a reminder that in contemplating the divine one must ultimately raise the mind from linguistic representation and leave it behind. But while the *via negativa* emphasised the gulf between the

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14. See *Conf.*, I, xiii (col.671). Also *De Doctrina Christiana*, in *De Doctrina Christiana; De Vera Religione*, ed. Joseph Martin (Turnholt: Typographi Brepols, 1962), II, i, 1-3.

15. See Chapter II of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in *The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York and London: Paulist Press, 1987), pp.147-153.

representations possible within human language and the realm of the divine, in the later Middle Ages commentators on pseudo-Dionysius tended to compromise his views and to stress the *via positiva*, emphasising the appropriateness of similitudes and their ability to convey positive information when discussing divine matters. As Alistair Minnis comments, 'Deferring to his great *auctoritas* they allowed him his view, but tended to obtrude the Pauline-Augustinian emphasis on the positive connections between creatures and Creator.'[16] Medieval thinkers were thus inclined to minimise the disruptive force of those aspects of language which suggested its lack of connection to any unified truth regarding the ineffable divine. How much more, then, do they do this when considering those truths, all aspects of one truth, which the mind could grasp? That Augustine's thought tends in this direction is clear from his faith in the capacity of the receiver to reconstruct and abstract unified meaning from the linear structures of language, evinced in the above quotation where he distinguishes the 'totum' of what he has to say from the syllables by means of which it is expressed.

Clarification of how such a reclamation of language could be achieved can be provided by turning to Augustine's discussion of the conventional nature of linguistic signification in his dialogue *De Magistro*[17], an issue which, as I observed above, potentially challenges the efficacy of language's referentiality. It is stated with regard to language that 'Nam quae loquimur, ea significamus; non autem quae res significatur, sed signum quo significatur loquentis ore procedit, nisi cum ipsa signa significantur.' (Bk VIII ch.xxiii, col.1209) Thus, the only thing directly presented in language is language itself[18], and there is no intrinsic connection between signs and things. For this reason, language of itself can provide no referential meaning but must be related to a prior knowledge of things which already exists in the minds of both sender and receiver:

> Per ea signa quae verba appellantur, nos nihil discere; potius enim, ut dixi, vim verbi, id est significatione quae latet in sono, re ipsa quae significatur cognita, discimus, quam illam tali significatione percipimur.
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> (*De Mag.* Bk X, ch.xxxiv, col.1215)

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16. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*, ed. A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.171.
17. St Augustine *De Magistro*, *PL*, 32, 1193-1220.
18. See ibid., X, xxx (col.1212).

For Augustine, and for the medieval world in general, this knowledge of things was based on a direct mental apprehension of the external world, involving a clear continuity between mind and reality[19]. Even the radical nominalist, William of Ockham, accepted this when he remarked in his *Summa Logicae* that mental concepts are natural signs of things[20]. As Derrida comments in *Of Grammatology* with regard to Aristotle's espousal of this view, 'the feelings of the mind, expressing things naturally, constitute a sort of universal language which can then efface itself. It is the stage of transparence. Aristotle can sometimes omit it without risk.' (p.11) The effect of asserting such continuity between mind and reality is to connect the conventional signifying process of language to a direct knowledge of reality which supervises that process. Thus, while there is no real connection between words and things, there is felt to be a clear mental connection.

Given this, the process by which knowledge is communicated through language can be seen as analogous to the operation of the logical syllogism. The syllogism functions by taking two known premises and deducing a third necessarily implied by their combination. Just so, communication through language is seen as involving the combination of a number of significations already known to the receiver, in order to produce from them a new signification. However, the knowledge which the receiver starts with is not just a knowledge of the signs, but also of the things which they signify. This means that any final signification established by this process of composition stems from the direct knowledge of a prior reality, was latent in that knowledge, and is verifiable by reference to it. What is more, the multiple significations which facilitate communication are seen as unified within the totality of the final signification derived from their combination: as Augustine states, the syllables of a linguistic utterance ultimately pass away in order to communicate the whole of what is being said. Thus, this signification becomes not merely a linguistic construct, defined by and dependent on the conventions of a particular discourse, but a distinct

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19. See *Summa Theologicae*, ed. Institutum Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis, 5 vols (Ottawa: Studii Generalis O.Pr., 1941-45), I, lxxxv, 2, where Aquinas argues that the intellect and senses perceive not merely the impressions which are the phantasms and the intelligible species, but actual things through these impressions. See also *ST*, I, lxxvi, 2, ad.4.

20. *Summa Logicae Pars Prima*, ed. Philotheus Boehner (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1957), I, xiv, 51.

conceptual unity, traceable to an extra-linguistic reality. This view effectively serves to govern and stabilise those linguistic structures: the totality of this signified, guaranteed by virtue of its source in reality, is seen as encompassing in its unity the diverse significations through which it is communicated, thus serving to exert a centripetal influence on them. Hence the disruptive effects of the temporal structure of language are contained by subordinating its multiple grammatical functions to the direct apprehension of a unifying referent. Thomas of Erfurt, in his fourteenth-century *Grammatica Speculativa*, confirms this:

> *Omnis modus significandi activus est ab aliqua rei proprietate.* Circa secundum notandum, quod cum huiusmodi rationes sive modi significandi activus non sint figmenta, oportet omnem modum significandi activum ab aliqua rei proprietate radicaliter oriri.[21]

This conception of linguistic signification establishes a relationship between the structures of language and the structure of reality, as illustrated in the following passage from Hugh of St Victor's *Didascalicon* (written c.1327):

> Quod ergo sonis oris, qui simul subsistere incipet et desinit ad rationam mentis est; hoc omne spatium temporia ad aeternitatem. Ratio mentis intrinsecum verbum est, quod sono vocis, id est verba extrinseco manifestatur, et divina sapienta, quam de corde suo pater eructavit, in se invisibilis per creaturas, et in creaturis, agnoscitur.[22]

Those aspects of reality which appear to be diversified and contingent are seen as contained in a harmonised pattern within the atemporal unity of the divine *ordo*, which encompasses all things. Thus the structure of reality reaffirms the concept of a theocentric unity which serves to underpin authority. Medieval thought on language invokes this same concept of structure, requiring us to move via temporal language to a direct contemplation of the signified meaning as an independent totality. The subordination of linguistic structures to the perception of such a transcendent signified mirrors the containment of temporal reality within a totalising pattern, and allows the signifying process of language to be assimilated to the structure of reality. Rather than having a subversive effect, language is thus turned to the validation of that structure, and

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21. *Grammatica Speculativa of Thomas of Erfurt*, ed. G.L. Bursill-Hall (London: Longman, 1972), II, iv, pp.137-8.
22. *Didascalicon*, *PL*, 176, 739-838, V, iv (col.790).

hence of the structure of thought, as its signing is seen to reproduce the metaphysical assumptions on which these rely.

This is in essence typical of medieval views of language and signification. However, in defining verbal signification as typically subordinated to the apprehension of a prior signified one must be aware that the Middle Ages did not have one consistent standard noetic or epistemology. Developments and individuations in these might in turn lead to significant alterations in language theory and these may frustrate any attempt to define any one view as typical. That there were considerable developments in language theory is clear, particularly from the rigorous logical analysis developed by the *modistae* from the twelfth century on[23]. But, as I noted above, it is important to see how such modifications and developments are located within a wider intellectual enterprise, and it is in relation to this that the consistency of medieval thought on language can be perceived. Similarly, changes in medieval noetic and epistemology can be seen as subordinated to the perpetuation of a governing teleology, and to have a consistency in their dedication to perpetuating the belief in a stabilising structural centre.

To illustrate this it may be worth examining briefly the thoughts of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) on human perception and knowledge of reality. These two thinkers are deliberate choices, because in their thoughts on these matters they are substantially different from one another. In particular, Aquinas departs considerably from Augustine's views on divine illumination and the perception of intelligible truth. Yet, as I shall demonstrate, despite their considerable differences, their conclusions equally reproduce the fundamental assumptions which make possible the containment of the subversive aspects of language.

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To maintain the view of linguistic signification as being controlled by a prior reality it is necessary, as I observed above, to maintain that that reality be directly perceptible to the mind. Medieval thought on reality is founded on the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible;

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23. For discussion of the development and significance of modistic grammar see Bursill-Hall's introduction to *Grammatica Speculativa*.

between that which is perceptible to the senses and that which is perceptible only to the intellect. With regard to sensible reality, Etienne Gilson observes that 'Augustine had become acquainted with the main arguments of the sceptics against the truth value of sensations. In his *Contra Academicos*, and later on in his *De Trinitate*, Augustine forcefully maintained the validity of sense knowledge against all these sceptical arguments (sensory illusions, dreams, mental diseases).'[24] Aquinas concurs with Augustine in defending the validity of sense knowledge against scepticism[25]. However, where Augustine perceives sensation as an act of the soul[26], Aquinas sees the senses as passive, being roused from a state of potential sensibility by the stimulation of actual sensible reality[27]. In this, while their views as to the operation of the senses diverge, they agree in asserting the capacity of the senses to actually know sensible reality directly.

Knowledge of intelligible reality, however, is more problematic. For Augustine, sensible reality does not provide an adequate basis for the cognition of universal principles. While he defends the connection between mind and reality with regard to the validity of sense knowledge, the certainties such knowledge provides are of the conditions of particular things and thus steeped in contingency. As such, knowledge of this sort is far beneath that of immutable universal principles, which are the proper objects of the intellect[28]. Augustine, therefore, finds it necessary to contrive an alternative mode of knowledge which pertains to the intellect. But this presents certain problems: it is clear to him that the mind possesses knowledge which is necessarily true, such as that of mathematical principles, as is indicated in his remark in the *Confessiones* that 'continet memoria numerorum dimensionumque rationes et leges innumerabiles' (Bk X, ch.12, col.787). It is not, however, clear exactly whence such knowledge is derived, for since both the human mind and the reality which it perceives are mutable, then it is felt that neither can

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24. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p.76.
25. See above, p.8, n.18
26. *De Quantitate Anime*, *PL*, 32, 1035-1080, xxiii-xxx, esp. xxx (col.1068): '[...] Sensus est corporus passio per seipsam non latens animam [...].' Sensation certainly involves the action of an external material thing on the body, but sensation is only produced when the soul actively attends to such an action. It is this act of attention which constitutes sensation.
27. *ST*, I, lxxviii, 3.
28. *De Diversibus Quaestiones LXXXIII*, *PL*, 40, 1-100, ix.

be the source of human knowledge of universals, which are necessary truths and therefore unchanging:

> Omne quod corporeus sensus attingit, quod et sensibile dicitur, sine ulla intermissione temporis commutatur. [...] Non est igitur exspectanda sinceritas veritatis a sensibus corporis.[29]

Augustine therefore concludes that the source of knowledge must be something external to the mind which imbues it with such knowledge. This leads him to state the doctrine of divine illumination, whereby when the mind forms a true judgement concerning intelligible reality it does so through contact with the divine mind. It is this which produces such knowledge, as the divine mind superadds the illumination of its own fixed and immutable intellect to the inferior mind of man[30]. What this means for Augustine's model of communication is that the derivation of meaning from direct apprehension of reality extends from statements concerning sensible reality to those concerning the intelligible:

> Cum vero de iis agitur quae mente conspicimus, id est intellectu atque ratione, ea quidem loquimur quae praesentia contuemur in illa interiore luce veritatis, qua ipse qui dicitur homo interior, illustratur et fruitur: sed tunc quoque noster auditor, si et et ipse illa secreto ac simplici oculo videt; novit quod dico sua contemplatione, non verbis meis. Ergo ne huncquidem doceo vera dicens, vera intuentem; docetur enim non verbis meis, sed ipsis rebus, Deo intus pandente, manifestis [...].
>
> (*De Mag.*, Bk XII, ch.xl, col.1217)

Thus, the human mind is conceived as having access to a perceptible reality, at the levels of both contingency and universality. This effectively stabilises language's signification, allowing the meaning of an utterance to be construed as independent of its linguistic formulation.

Where Augustine resorts to the theory of illumination from an external source as the source of human knowledge of intelligible truth, Aquinas reinterprets this theory so as to locate the capacity to attain such knowledge within the human mind:

> Non oportet quod mens humana, quae movetur a deo ad cognoscendum naturaliter cognita, nova luce perfundatur.[31]

For Aquinas divine illumination does not involve a separate intellect implanting in the mind ideas to which it could not attain by means of its natural operation. Rather he identifies this illumination with the divine

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29. Ibid.
30. See *De Trinitate*, *PL*, 42, 867-1056, IX, xii.
31. *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Expositio super Librum Boethium in Trinitate*, ed. Bruno Decker (Leiden: Brill, 1955), I, i, p.62.

intellect's gift of the agent intellect, a pale reflection of the light of the divine mind, as one of the soul's natural powers[32]. The knowledge proper to the intellect is then seen as derived from sensible things, (contrary to Augustine's view) by virtue of the agent intellect's natural operation in the soul[33]. Human intellection of intelligible reality, therefore, proceeds from the natural functions of the mind. The process takes place thus: it is in the nature of external reality to be actually sensible and potentially intelligible[34]. The sense, a passive power, is acted on by a sensible thing, which rouses it from a state of potency to extract an image or phantasm. This in turn is referred to the intellect. The intellect consists of two powers: the potential intellect and the agent intellect. It must be considered as potential because were it wholly active then it would be capable of comprehending all universal being, a power which pertains only to God[35]. That it does not do so indicates that it is only potentially active in relation to that being. But equally, were it wholly passive it could not act on the phantasms in order to extract the intelligible species that are only potential in them, and hence it could aspire to no understanding of universal forms[36]. It is in this that the agent intellect plays its role, abstracting from the phantasms the species potential in them, and allowing the potential intellect to receive them[37]. Thus, the agent intellect is a part of the natural powers of the soul. Its function is not to admit ideas from a separate intellect, but to abstract these from what is presented to it by the senses. The intellect, therefore, does not simply give the human mind access to intelligible reality *per se*, but first requires the perception of sensible reality by the senses. As Etienne Gilson puts it in his *History of Christian Philosophy*, 'The origin of human knowledge is [...] in the senses; it results from a collaboration between material things, senses and intellect.' (p.377)

Clearly, this is significantly different from Augustine's theory of knowledge. By placing an emphasis on the sensible basis of intellectual knowledge Aquinas brings to the mind a weight of empiricism which constitutes a radical departure from the Augustinian view. Similarly, his view of the agent intellect as being wholly an operation natural to the

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32. Ibid. See also *ST*, I, lxxix, 4.
33. *ST*, I, lxxxiv, 6.
34. Ibid., I, lxxix, 3.
35. Ibid., I, lxxix, 2.
36. See above, n.32.
37. Ibid.

soul removes the direct communication with the divine mind which was opened by Augustine's theory of illumination. As the intellect participates in the divine intellect not by any sharing of being, but in owing its being to it as its source, so the field of human knowledge becomes much more rigidly separated from the divine. Gilson remarks that 'the creation is placed infinitely below the creator, so far below him that there is no real relation between God and things, but only between things and God.' (*History*, p.373) Any knowledge which we can have of the divine only derives from analogy, where we may know something of a cause from the nature of its effects. The empiricism in Aquinas' philosophy, in conjunction with the stress on the gulf between the temporal world and the divine, can be seen as pointing forward in many ways to the radical nominalism of the fourteenth century. It would, therefore, clearly be wrong to consider the relationship of the thought of Aquinas on these matters to that of Augustine as being merely a conservative assent to and reiteration of an orthodoxy.

However, it is equally clear that both are dedicated to preserving a sense of the homogeneity and authority of all Christian thought. For example, in refuting Augustine's opinion that immutable truth cannot be arrived at from sensible things, Aquinas does not state that Augustine is wrong:

> Dicendum quod per verba illa Augustini datur intelligi quod veritas non sit totaliter a sensibus expectanda. Requiritur enim lumen intellectus agentis, per quod immutabiliter veritatem in rebus mutabilibus cognoscamus, et disceramus ipsas res a similitudinibus rerum.
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> (*ST*, q.84, art.6)

Thus, Aquinas simply reconstrues Augustine's words, denying any contradiction between their positions. Similarly, in defining divine illumination as the implanting of the agent intellect rather than any direct communication from an external intellect, Aquinas again states that it was such an implanting to which Augustine referred, and in fact cites Augustine as an authority in confirmation of his view[38]. Rather than risk compromising the unity of the intellectual traditions of the Church by open disagreement, Aquinas simply reinterprets Augustine to accord with his own views. As I have already observed, this is typical of the way in which medieval thinkers dealt with their *auctoritates*, and

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38. *Boethium in Trinitate*, I, i, p.62.

exemplifies the process of thought whereby diverse theoretical positions are construed as uniting in a common end. And just as Aquinas affirms a central core of truth which both he and Augustine serve and which resolves any difference in their thought, so too they both provide in their different ways an epistemology and noetic which is required to make language capable of being turned to the service of that truth instead of disrupting it. The views of both permit language to be traced back to a stable prior reality, and in this they make it possible to contain the subversive implications of its conventional and temporal signifying structure. Thus, language acquires the function of mere referentiality, the particularities of its structure being reduced to a transparency through which the human mind passes, turning to a direct consideration of the signified *res* or *rei*. This effectively contains the difficulties implicit in any attempt to trace linguistic utterance to unified truth.

4

At this point, in order to crystallise the general outline presented above, it may prove valuable to provide a specific instance of how medieval language theory assimilates these suppositions as its governing principles. Jesse M. Gellrich discusses the way in which medieval grammarians dealt with the problem of *consignificatio*: the ways in which words alter their meanings as they take on different syntactic functions[39]. He examines the discussion of the problem in John of Salisbury's *Metalogicon* (completed 1159), where John addresses the question of the relationship between the different significations of words based on the stem 'white', when it occurs in a noun (*albedo*), a verb (*albet*), and an adjective (*album*)[40]. The problem is that the variety of meanings specified by the different grammatical forms sharing a common stem suggests that their meaning is determined not through any direct reference to a signified reality, but through their position within a syntactic order, and hence is dependent on the chain of differences operating within that language. Language, rather than reality would thus be shaping meaning. John deals with this problem by determining the noun 'whiteness', as that which 'sine omni participatione subjecti, ipsam significat

39. Gellrich, pp.102-5.
40. *Metalogicon*, *PL*, 199, 823-946, III, ii.

qualitatem'. As such, the noun is taken as the basic semantic unit, signifying through a direct reference to a subsistent thing, and its meaning seen as outside syntax and independent of the chain of significations which make up the language. Consequently, in accounting for the syntactic function of the verb and adjective, John recalls the remarks of Bernard of Chartres (d.c.1130) on this question:

> Aibat Bernardus Cartnotensis, quia albedo significat virginem incorruptam; albet, eadem introentum thalamum aut cubantem in toro; album vera, eadem, sed corruptam.[41]

The comparison of the effects of *consignificatio* to the deflowering of a virgin reveals the mode of thought by which any subversive effects which this aspect of language might have are effectively contained. Gellrich comments thus:

> While [...] they were touching on different "ways of signifying" in connotative functions, it would be wrong to imagine that they were unearthing a principle of linguistic indeterminacy. Terms differ manifestly in their simultaneous secondary meanings - their consignification; but they never lose possession of the primary stem from which they derive.
>
> (Gellrich, p.104)

This is clear from the image of deflowering a virgin, in that the woman of the image remains the same physical person throughout her transition, providing a continuity between what John and Bernard see as her initial state of purity and her later, supposedly debased, state. By analogy, a word participating in the process of *consignificatio* maintains a connection with its pristine status as a noun which signifies by direct reference[42]. If its meanings vary according to syntactic context, they nevertheless remain in contact with a primary extra-syntactic origin. Hence, as the later conditions of the woman are defined as a corruption, and thus determined through reference to her initial purity, so syntactic context is seen as something which qualifies the originary 'virginal' signification of a noun, with that qualification necessarily depending on the originary condition as the primary determinant of meaning. The ideal state of the word 'whiteness' as a noun, representing the quality directly and in itself, thus provides a point of anchorage which its consignificative derivatives can be traced back to. It is a stable centre of reference which governs the linguistic process and controls its potential

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.

subversions. This clearly illustrates the ways in which medieval thought on language rests on the assumption of an extra-linguistic point of reference constituting a unified meaning which stabilises linguistic utterance and contains its disruptive potential.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida observes that 'the idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and [...] against difference in general.' (p.18) The idea of the book as specified by Derrida here corresponds to that which medieval thought, as exemplified by Augustine and Aquinas, seeks to preserve. Despite differences between individual writers, and despite potentially disruptive elements existing within particular theories, medieval thought is located within an intellectual framework dedicated to the service of a totalising theocentric view of reality, and this holds true for its language theory. Rather than rejecting the disruption of language, medieval theory strives to control it and turn language to serve that which is 'profoundly alien' to it. It is a fundamental aim of Scholastic literary theory, as I will attempt to show, to extend this tendency from the regions of basic discursive language into the special linguistic realms of poetry and fiction.

5

The medieval attitude towards literary discourse is perhaps most evident in writers' treatment of their sources and *auctores*. C.S. Lewis remarks on this with regard to La3amon's *Brut* and *Sawles Warde*, a prose text by a writer known only as Johan:

> The scholar's ideal of accuracy in translation, the historian's ideal of fidelity to a document, and the artist's ideal of originality, are all alike absent from the minds of La3amon and Johan. [...] We might equally call our medieval authors the most unoriginal or the most original of men. They are so unoriginal that they hardly ever attempt to write anything unless someone has written it down before. They are so rebellious and insistently original that they can hardly reproduce a page of any older work without

> transforming it [...]. They can no more leave their originals intact than we can leave our own earlier drafts intact when we fair-copy them. We always tinker and (as we hope) improve. But in the Middle Ages you did that as cheerfully to other people's work as to your own.[43]

Medieval writers, then, are typically self-effacing, denying any responsibility for a work and presenting themselves as the transparent vehicle for the work or ideas of their *auctores*. Yet at the same time they will radically alter and add to their sources with no sense of any incongruity between the passive role they claim to adopt and their actual literary activity[44].

Similar attitudes towards texts can be seen in the allegorical interpretation of fictional or mythical tales. A striking example can be found in the interpretations of the Orpheus myth, given in, among other places, commentaries on Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*[45]. The fourteenth-century scholar Nicholas Trevet offers a reading of Book III, Metre 12 in which the would-be rapist Aristaeus, who brings about the death of Eurydice, represents good virtue while Eurydice represents the appetitive powers of the soul which flee virtue's governance[46]. This interpretation reveals a lack of consideration of the literal implications of the story to the point of countenancing clear contradiction between the literal and allegorical meanings. Such interpretations are commonplace in medieval literary exegesis and display a clear lack of interest in the nuances of the particular narrative structure of a text:a lack of interest which is similar to the freedom displayed in writers' treatment of their sources. In both cases their attitude towards the text is wholly alien to modern thought.

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43. 'The Genesis of a Medieval Book', in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp.18-40 (pp.18-19).

44. On the self-effacing attitude of medieval writers, see also Tim William Machan, 'Textual Authority and the Works of Hoccleve, Lydgate and Henryson', *Viator*, 23 (1992), 281-99.

45. See, for example, William of Aragon's commentary, excerpted and translated in Minnis & Scott, pp.332-36. Also the relevant section of William of Conches' commentary, printed in part in Edouard Jeauneau, 'L'Usage de la Notion d'Integumentum à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches', *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 32 (1957), 35-100 (pp.45-46).

46. The relevant passage is printed in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp.110-12. All references to Henryson's works in this thesis are to Fox's edition.

J.W.H. Atkins argues that medieval thought about imaginative literature is confused and distorted by other concerns which he sees as non-literary:

> There was an absence of clear ideas concerning the nature of poetry in particular, its aims and its standards; while further obstacles to a free and rational discussion of literature existed in the deep-seated reverence for the *littera scripta*, the distorted views of poetry resulting from the allegorical interpretation, or again the predominance of logical studies in the medieval curriculum, with their tendency to divert interest from literary matters.[47]

Atkins' conception of diverse non-literary influences leading to 'an absence of clear ideas' in discussions of literature seems somewhat at odds with the general tenor of medieval thought, which exhibits a tendency towards encyclopaedic classification that is nothing if not precise in its detail and exactness. Part of the problem with his account is revealed in the casual use of the term 'literary matters', which assumes that the nature of these matters is absolutely defined and self-evident. But surely each age constructs its own definitions of what constitutes 'literary matters', a fact indicated by changes in the literary canon which nowadays includes types of writing not usually admitted in the past: journals and diaries are one example of this. What it is important to realise is that medieval attitudes towards literature, which seem so alien to a modern sensibility, are not the result of any confusion or lack of clear thought, but derive from a wholly different set of concerns and priorities. These entail a careful consideration of the relation of such writing to the concepts of language and meaning widely propounded in the Middle Ages. Thus, the lack of regard for particular narrative and verbal structures exhibited by translators and exegetes, and even the attitudes of those who dismiss imaginative literature altogether, are founded not in any confusion or lack of clear ideas, but in a precise and distinctive way of thinking about such writing. I aim to demonstrate that medieval attitudes to imaginative literature relate to its status as a problematic type of writing: one which presents difficulties for the thinking which underlies medieval language theory's containment of potentially disruptive aspects of general discursive language.

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47. J.W.H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), pp.2-3.

6

The value of imaginative literature was debated throughout the Middle Ages, with some thinkers dismissing the notion that it should be afforded serious study and others attempting to assign it some value. The debate is illustrated in a twelfth-century commentary on Juvenal's satires, cited by Alistair Minnis, which refers to the difference between the attitudes of William of Conches (d.1154) and Bernard of Chartres:

> Having raised the issue of the part of philosophy to which Juvenal's satires belong, the anonymous commentator claims that Bernard thought this question irrelevant because poetry does not treat of philosophy. But William of Conches, he continues, made a distinction between mere writers (*actores*) and writers who are authorities (*auctores*). The works of *actores* do not pertain to philosophy, but the works of *auctores*, although they do not teach philosophy directly, nevertheless relate to philosophy in that they provide moral instruction and, thereby, pertain to ethics.
> (*Authorship*, pp.26-26)

But while some individuals considered poetry not to be wholly worthless, the extent to which it could be assigned a serious value was usually very limited, especially in the early Middle Ages. The fourth-century author Macrobius, although he may well not have been a Christian, nevertheless admirably exemplifies the way in which doubts about the value of imaginative writing appear to have been endemic among religious thinkers at this time, even those who wished to defend the use of imaginative modes of writing. In his commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, having declared that he intends to defend the use of fiction in philosophical works, he attempts to describe the various types of *fabula*. 'Fabulae', he observes, 'aut tantum conciliandae auribus voluptatis, aut adhortationis quoque in bonam frugem gratiae repertae sunt.'[48] Dismissing the first type out of hand, he proceeds to make further distinctions within the second type. He does not, however, consider all of these as appropriate for philosophy:

> In quibusdam enim et argumenta et ficto locatur et per mendacia ipse relationis ordo contexitur, et sunt illae Aesopi fabulae elegentia fictionis illustres, at in aliis argumentum quidem fundatur veri silidate sed haec ipsa veritas per quaedam composita et ficta profertur, et hoc iam vocatur narratio fabulosa, non fabula [...]. Ex hac ergo secunda divisione quam diximus, a philosophiae

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48. *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. J. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1963), p.5.

> libris prior species, quae concepta de falso per falsum narratur, aliena est. Sequens in aliam rursum discretionem scissa dividitur: [...] aut enim contextio narrationis per turpia et indigna numinibus ac monstro similia componitur [...], quod genus totum philosophi nescire malunt - aut sacrarum rerum notio sub pio figmentorum velamine honestis et tecta rebus et vestita nominibus enuntiatur: et hoc est solum figmenti genus quod cautio de divinus rebus philosophantis admittit.
>
> (Ibid. pp.5-6)

Some suspicion about the nature of literary fiction is suggested by the fact that Macrobius does not seek to define any autonomous value for literature, but only sees it as worthwhile insofar as it can in some way be turned to the service of other disciplines. In themselves, such writings are clearly considered to be of a dubious nature. This suspicion is further indicated by the detail and careful selectivity of his approach as he seeks to separate the wheat from the chaff. What is more, even fictional works which Macrobius considers to be morally edifying are rejected as inappropriate to philosophy. Thus, despite the fact that Macrobius's integumental theory aims to defend the value of imaginative writing, his arguments are pervaded by a strong sense of its possible pitfalls, and this leads to a severe curtailment of the amount of authority which he assigns to it.

A similar attitude is found in the *Dialogus super Auctores* of Conrad of Hirsau (d.c.1150), in which pagan authors from Aesop to Virgil are characterised as school authors, 'quibus imbui floribunda tyrunculorum solent ingenia'[49]. The teacher describes knowledge of these writers as something which 'licet in discente sit veniabile, nevi nota non caret in docente' (p.73). Conrad's attitude here mirrors that implicit in John of Salisbury's assertion that 'poetas philosophorum cunas celebre esse'[50]. While this assigns some value to such writing, it also has a negative side: as Alistair Minnis observes, 'grown men with mature minds cannot remain in their cradle.'[51] In this view, and despite an awareness of its moral utility, poetic fiction is seen as valuable only in so far as it provides the primary steps in education; but it is a tool which should ultimately be left behind as wisdom increases, so that one may progress to the infinitely more serious study of philosophy and the Bible.

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49. *Dialogus super Auctores*, in *Accessus ad Auctores: Bernard d'Utrecht: Conrad d'Hirsau Dialogus super Auctores*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens (Leiden: Brill, 1970), p.72.

50. *Metalogicon*, I, xxii, (col.852).

51. Minnis & Scott, p.122.

Another point of view which provided some valid function for imaginative literature sees it as a source of relaxation and recreation. In this way, as Glending Olson observes, such writing could be located within an ethical framework by allowing it a practical value in so far as it provides rest and recuperation from the pressures of serious work, and allows one to return to such work refreshed and invigoured by the relief which it has provided.[52] Many medieval thinkers, following Aristotle's thoughts on recreation[53], located imaginative writing in such a context, hence avoiding total condemnation.

But this view also had its negative aspects in that it presented literature as ultimately being a concession to human frailty. Furthermore, excessive indulgence in literary pleasure was considered sinful[54]. Being thus distinguished from serious activities, and evaluated only in terms of its contribution to the furtherance of such activities, imaginative writing was still not of itself afforded the kind of serious consideration associated with theological works or with the curriculum of the seven liberal arts. This is illustrated in the care Aquinas takes to separate the use of imaginative language in the Bible from that found in poetry:

> Dicendum quod poeta utitur metaphoris propter repraesentationem; repraesentatio enim naturaliter homini delectabilis est. Sed sacra doctrina utitur metaphoris propter necessitatem et utilitatem, ut dictum est.
>
> (*ST*, I, q.1, art.9, ad.1)

Whatever the value of poetic fiction, it was not seen to be of a nature which could justify serious study, since there was too much in it which was felt to be merely frivolous. As Hugh of St Victor comments, the distance between poetry and philosophy is such that 'quicunque ad scientiam pertingere cupit, si relicta veritate artium reliquis se implicare voluerit, materiam laboris nedum plurimam sed et infinitam sustinebit, et fructum exiguum.'[55]

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52. Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp.90-127.

53. Ibid. pp.93-115. For Aristotle's views see *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), X, vi, 13.21-13.23, pp.282-83.

54. See Olson, pp.98-9, 105-8. Also Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, clxviii, 3.

55. Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalicon*, III, iv (col.769).

7

Why, then, should this dubiety about the value of imaginative literature be so pervasive as to influence even those who sought to establish some sense of its worth? An answer may be provided from an examination of the specific accusations aimed at such writing, and the thought which underlies them. Such accusations revolve around two basic assertions about the negative influence of poetic and fictional writing which reflect the concerns which were uppermost in the critics' minds. In his *Republic*, Plato had criticised poets for rousing the passions of their audience and for presenting falsehoods in their writings[56], and these animadversions were repeated time and again by medieval thinkers who saw such works as distracting attention from the supremely important matters of Christian truth and its promised salvation, a view which is evident in worries over the use of such writings in education, where it was feared that they would have a negative effect on young minds[57].

These objections to poetry and fiction are founded in a sense of their resistance to medieval thinkers' efforts to contain those elements of language which were seen as potentially disrupting the dominant view of language and signification. The suspicion which fuelled them was not merely confined to imaginative literature, but also extended into the field of rhetoric, a particularly problematic realm of discourse in the Middle Ages. What is significant is that in all these modes of discourse emphasis is placed on formal linguistic qualities (poetry and rhetoric by virtue of their formal ornamentation, and fiction by constructing significations which have a merely textual existence), bringing these to the foreground of an audience's attention. As was suggested above (p.4), this is far from amenable to the preoccupations of medieval intellectuals in that it announces the detachment of a discourse from any prior reality which can govern its significations. Questions and doubts which are raised over the nature of rhetoric are thus related closely to the concern over the nature and influence of imaginative literature.

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56. *The Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), X, ii-iii, pp.379-86.

57. For a brief general discussion of this concern, see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1974), pp.50-4.

Developments in the field of rhetoric during the late-Classical period and the early Middle Ages had brought questions about language to the fore of intellectual debate among Christian thinkers, with the influence of the Second Sophistic leading to considerable suspicion of ornate language. The rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic looked on rhetorical language as a means of manipulating the audience for the merely contingent purposes of political exigency, regardless of ultimate truth. The Sophists held that an audience's assent to or rejection of a point of view could be determined not by the merits of the argument in relation to truth, but solely by the persuasive power of the language in which it was couched, and, indeed, viewed such manipulation as the proper end of rhetoric[58]. This view denies the attachment of rhetorical language, and of responses to it, to any perception of truth based in transcendent reality, and instead emphasises the ways in which perception of reality is shaped by language[59], with meaning being established ultimately only within the context of a discourse.

Christian intellectuals, however, (along with those of other persuasions) insisted that their beliefs were founded in absolute truth. But since Sophistry separated rhetoric and audience response from any basis in an extra-linguistic reality, it therefore denied any uniquely authoritative status for Christianity. Indeed, a Christian preacher's use of such persuasive techniques, however immediately effective they might be, would ultimately weaken the impact and authority of his discourse: assent to a Christian point of view which had been obtained by Sophistic means could be superseded simply by having an opposing point of view expressed more eloquently. Ultimately such elaborate persuasion obtrudes itself in such a way as to deny the audience any direct grasp of the simple truth which the Christian preacher aims to inculcate, thus undermining the affirmation that Christian values are founded in the very order of reality. Christian thinkers therefore reacted to Sophistry by condemning it as an abuse of language. They reasserted the priority of

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58. See Murphy, pp.35-8. Also Charles S. Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic* (New York: MacMillan, 1924), pp.2-50. A good primary source is Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists*, trans. Wilmer C. Wright (London: Heinemann; New York: G.P. Putnam's Son's, 1922), pp.319-565.

59. See Derrida's brief observations in 'White Mythology', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp.209-71 (pp.248-9).

an absolute perceptible reality, the apprehension of which was seen as being perverted by Sophistic rhetoric as it drew attention away from reality to its own linguistic structures. This led to a suspicion of ornate language in general, since any discourse which foregrounded its own structural elements could be seen as interposing itself between its audience and reality, thus obscuring their perception, and produced a preference among many preachers for a plain style which could allow statements to be judged by their content rather than expression, so that the truth could shine through[60].

One can see this suspicion in the comments of St Jerome (d.420), who when writing on the subject of language, compares *sensus* and *verbum* to bread and husks respectively[61]. This indicates a sense that in the process of interpretation the priority is not attention to the particular verbal structures of language, but to a unified meaning existing independently of those structures. In this, Jerome's remark mirrors the ideas about language which were so widely prevalent in the Middle Ages. But coming when it does, it also reflects the more historically specific concern about the possible negative effects of eloquent language on an audience, which had arisen in reaction to Sophistry. Thus, in Jerome's comments, attitudes inspired by the historically specific problems raised by Sophistry coincide with those found in medieval concepts of language in general. This illustrates the close relation of these problems and the concerns to the general concerns of language theory in the Middle Ages, and the pervasiveness of their influence on medieval thought on these matters.

These concerns were shared and elaborated by St Augustine, in whose writings the risk of eloquent language drawing the audience's attention away from truth is a recurrent issue. But where some Christian thinkers were led to reject rhetorical manipulation of language altogether and insist on a plain style as the only one appropriate to Christian truth, Augustine is rather more liberal. In his *De Doctrina Christiana* he effectively reclaims rhetoric as an appropriate tool for Christian preaching, seeing it not as a way of determining audience response, but as a means of inclining the audience to give the Christian message a fair hearing. However, this reclamation is still tempered wih

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60. See Murphy, pp.49-63.
61. St Jerome, *Epistola* XXI, *PL*, 22, 379-394, xlii, (col.394).

some suspicion and a recommendation that in seeking to persuade one's audience one should include plenty of clear rational argument and not rely too much on eloquent language, from fear that it will distract from a proper contemplation of the truths which such language is meant to serve[62]. Similarly, in his *Confessiones* he comments that those who were convinced of the wisdom of Faustus, the Manichean scholar, must have been affected by the pleasing qualities of his speech:

> Illi autem qui eum mihi promittebant, non boni rerum existimatores erant; et ideo illis videbatur prudens et sapiens, quia delectabat eos loquens.
>
> (*Conf.*, Bk V, ch.vi, col.710)

Despite the utility of rhetoric for the Christian preacher's aims, there remains a fear that if not used carefully such language will evoke a response which is based not on a perception of truth, but merely on an appetitive response to the attractiveness of language. The pure love directed at the spiritual truths contained in the word of God may be usurped by a carnal love based on the sensual pleasure of the temporal words of humanity[63]. In his emphasis on reality rather than language as the basis of audience response, Augustine stands in pointed opposition to the rhetorical theory of the Sophists, subordinating rhetorical language to the perception of a subsistent referent, and giving it a value only in so far as it can facilitate a clearer apprehension of truth.

Augustine extends his concerns about the effect of ornate language into the realms of poetic discourse as well as rhetoric. In his discussions of poetry he affords a certain value to versification, and locates this in the numerological proportions on which he sees quantative metre to be based. Writing about fictional poetry in his *De Ordine*, he dismisses the false subject matter, asserting that poetic fiction is 'rationabilim mendacorium potestas' (Bk II, ch.xiv, col.1014). 'Rationabilim', of course, connotes the term *ratio*. Augustine goes some way towards clarifying its implications in this context by exemplifying *ratio* in its use with regard to architecture, where it designates the harmony of proportions in a building (*De Ord.*, Bk II. ch.xi, cols 1010-11). Thus, Augustine's statement means that the fictions of which poetry is composed are ordered via metrical rules in accordance with a proper harmony and

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62. *De Doctrina Christiana*, IV, xxv, 55-8.

63. Augustine, in *De Ordine*, compares the literal meaning of scripture to the flesh, and the inward *sententia* to the spirit. *PL*, 32, 977-1021, II, xi, (col.1011).

proportion of structure. This harmony, however, is not based merely in contingent aesthetic conventions. Rather, it has its source in the unchanging numerological principles governing the structure of the universe[64]. Hence, the formal metrical structure of poetry is given a metaphysical basis: the metre of particular poems manifests in material form the universal numerological and proportional relations which govern it, and these relations reflect the structural harmony which underlies the ordering of the universe[65].

Such a view provides a possible justification for the ornate formal qualities of poetry, and many religious and philosophical writers seem to have been quite happy about composing metrical works[66]. However, Augustine still has strong reservations about its effect on an audience. He observes that although poetry can exhibit universal numerological principles, it cannot of itself make them wholly present to the mind, but can only represent them through the mediation of temporal language. In order to contemplate them in their entirety the mind must move away from particular poetic utterances to an abstract consideration of them. For this reason the art on which poetry is based is seen as more valuable than specific poems:

> Nec ideo tamen ars ipsa, qua uersus fabricatur, sic tempori obnoxia est, ut pulchritudo eius per mensuras morarum digeratur. Sed simul habet omnia, quibus efficit uersum non simul habentem omnia sed posterioribus priora tollentem, propterea tamen pulchrum, quia extrema uestigia illius pulchritudinis ostentat, quam constanter atque incommutabiliter ars ipsa custodit.
> (*De Vera Rel.*, Bk XXII, ch.xlii, p.213)

As with language in general, poetic language is seen as steeped in temporality, incapable of representing any reality in the unity which it would have when actually present to the mind. The beauty of such

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64. The way in which aesthetic forms were connected to metaphysical forms in the Middle Ages has been examined by Umberto Eco in *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (London: Radius, 1988), and in his *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

65. A stimulating discussion of the relationship between temporal poetic language and its atemporal principles in Augustine's writings is given by Eugene Vance in *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), Ch.2, 'Saint Augustine: Language as Temporality', pp.34-50.

66. Ernst Robert Curtius has remarked that religious Latin writings such as the *Stabat Mater* and *Dies Irae* were the greatest European medieval literary works before Dante. See his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p.390.

language, therefore, is only a shadow of that embodied in the principles which underlie it since these are universal and not subject to time. Hence, the audience should prefer the principles of the art, rather than particular verses.

For this reason, Augustine sees a response to poetry which concentrates on the individual features of poems as being inadequate, or even dangerous. In a striking passage from *De Vera Religione*, he pours scorn on those who do respond in this way:

> Itaque ut nonnulli peruersi magis amant uersam quam ipsam artem, qua conficitur uersus, quia plus se auribus quam intellegentiae dediderunt, ita multi temporalia diligunt, conditricem uero ac moderatricem temporum diuinam prouidentiam non requirunt atque in ipsa dilectione temporalium nolunt transire quod amant, at tam sunt absurdi, quam si quisquam in recitatione praeclari carminis unam aliquam syllabam solam perpetuo uellet audire.
>
> (Bk XXII, ch.xliii, pp.213-214)

In his contrast of the ears to the intellect, of that which perceives only sensible reality to that which perceives intelligible reality, Augustine underlines his identification of pleasure taken merely in the verbal and metrical structure of a poem with the love of temporal things in themselves, and with a failure to look to the eternal verities essential to salvation. The ornate and attractive form of poetic language produces the risk that the minds of the audience will never pass to a direct consideration of the signified things as they exist in reality, but will dwell on the imperfect constructs which are all that language can actually make present; mere shadows of the truth, differentiated and dispersed through temporality.

In his *Confessiones*, Augustine expresses concern about the use of music in church, and his remarks on the subject provide a useful analogy to his attitudes towards poetry[67]. In a section devoted to an analysis of the temptations of earthly beauty he tells how, after much agonising, he now tends towards an acceptance of the value of vocal music in the singing of psalms and hymns. Suspicious of his appetitive response to the music, he nevertheless feels that 'nunc ipso quod moveor, noncantu, sed rebus quae cantantur, cum liquida voce et convenientissima modulatione cantantur' (*Conf.*, Bk X, ch.xxxiii, col.800). Thus, an appetitive response

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67. This analogy is justified by Augustine's own writings: he treats both music and poetic metre in his *De Musica*, *PL*, 32, 1081-1192.

to the music's beauty is subordinated to an intellectual consideration of the meaning of the sung words. In this way, a pious and edifying context allows the accommodation within a valid devotional framework of a response which in itself would be inappropriate and fit only to be expelled from the mind of the devout. Such an accommodation provides equal justification for religious and philosophical writers' use of poetry for the praise of God or in serious philosophical works.

Music's value in a religious context hence becomes defined by its capacity to stir the emotions in a suitable direction. Augustine makes this clear when he draws a connection between the structure of music and the human constitution[68]:

> Et omnes affectus spiritus nostri pro sui diversitate habere proprios modos in voce atque cantu, quorum nescio qua occulta familiaritate excitentur.
>
> (*Conf.*, Bk X, ch.xxxiii, col.800)

This leads to the conclusion that music in church may have some value in so far as it can help arouse religious feeling:

> Magisque adducor, non quidem irretractabilem sententiam proferens, cantandi consuetudinem approbare in Ecclesia; ut per
>
> oblectamenta aurium infirmior animus in affectum pietatis assurgat.
>
> (Ibid.)

But the hesitancy expressed in the qualifying phrase suggests a considerable doubt remaining on the subject, and this is further indicated in the fact that he only accepts its value as a concession to 'infirmior animus'. This doubt is overtly stated where he continues thus:

> Tamen, cum mihi accidit ut me amplius cantus, quam res quae canitur, moveat; poenaliter me peccare confiteor, et tunc mallem non audire cantantem.
>
> (Ibid.)

The sensual pleasure of the music presents a risk since 'sensus non ita comitatur ut patienter sit posterior; sed tantum quia propter illam meruit

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68. The connection between the human constitution and music was frequently drawn: medieval theorists distinguished between *musica mundana*, *musica humana*, and *musica instrumentalis*. The first two referred to the harmony of the macrocosm and of the microcosm which is the human body, and were based on the common proportional harmonies perceived to be part of the make-up of both. The last referred to instrumental music. The structure of all three was seen as deriving from the numerical proportions which governed the universe. See, for instance Boethius, *De Musica*, in *De Institutione Arithmetica; De Institutione Musica*, ed. Godofredus Freidlein (Leipzig: [n.pub.], 1867; repr. Frankfurt: Minerva G.M.B.H., 1966), I, ii, pp.187-89.

admitti, etiam praecurrere ac ducere conatur.' (Ibid.) Thus, while music can on one hand play a valid part in church services, it may also be a temptation to its hearers, interposing itself between them and the truths which they should be contemplating, and leading their minds astray.

This is clearly similar to the concerns expressed about poetry, and which are implicit in Augustine's preference of the art of poetry over individual works. Nor is such an attitude mere idiosyncrasy on Augustine's part: analogous remarks expressing the same underlying concerns can be found throughout the Middle Ages. Boethius, in his *De Institutione Musica*, asserts that the most valuable part of music is the mathematical relations underlying it, echoing Augustine's views on metre. This leads him to assert that the true musician is he who is aware of these relations, not he who can best put them into practice, a view which was expressed in many medieval musical treatises[69]. Similarly, Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* condemns the use of instrumental music in church, since it was possible that its sensual pleasures might distract from contemplation of truth (*ST*, II-II, q.91, art.2, ad.4). St Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153) provides one further analogy in his condemnation of excessive ornamentation in the design of churches, which he feared would stimulate sensual pleasure, thus providing a similar distraction[70]. The common factor to all of these instances is that they express a fear that what is pleasing to the senses, instead of leading to a contemplation of the true beauty which is the source of any earthly pulchritude, may rather tempt the mind of the beholder to remain rooted in the pleasures of temporality, without considering the relation of the objects of their senses to unified truth. It seems, then, that the thought underlying the frequent accusation that poetry rouses the passions is related to a widespread concern among medieval intellectuals about the possible negative effects of sensual beauty on the mind.

This testifies to the perception of a relationship between linguistic structures and the structure of reality. The nature of sensual temptation was seen to be such that it focuses the mind on what is merely temporal and contingent, and draws it away from a proper awareness of the

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69. *De Institutione Musica*, I, xxxiv, pp.223-25. See also Jacobus of Liege, *Speculum Musicale*, ed. Roger Bragard, 7 vols (Rome: [n.pub], 1955-73), I, I, iii, pp.17-19.

70. *Apologia ad Guillelmum*, *PL*, 182, 895-919 (cols 915-16).

atemporal unity of the divine *ordo*, which encompasses all things. And as such, it disrupts the view of the structure of reality on which the Church based its authority. The ornate language of poetry similarly disrupts the desired relationship between language, perception and reality, foregrounding itself and thrusting itself to the forefront of the audience's attention. Thus, rather than being governed by a direct apprehension of reality, language takes precedence and interposes itself between mind and reality, shaping perception by stimulating the senses. By resisting being reduced to transparency, poetic language deviates from the standard medieval accounts of linguistic signification. Hence its mode of signification tends to undermine the preoccupations which medieval thinkers sought to inscribe in language's very structure. Given such a state of affairs, although a suitably edifying context might go some way to counteracting poetry's negative aspects, the pious and serious-minded were inclined to feel that it should be regarded with suspicion, if not outrightly condemned, and therefore tended to exclude it from serious study as part of the Christian curriculum. Hence the recurrent criticism that it rouses the passions.

Similar worries underlie the criticisms which were aimed at the fictitious nature of much poetry, in which the concern that such writing may stimulate a sensual response is exacerbated by a suspicion of the false subject matter. In the early-thirteenth century, Honorius of Autun attacks both the fiction and philosophy of the pagans and asks 'Porro quid confert animae pugna Hectoris, vel disputatis Platonis, aut carmina Maronis, vel neniae Nasonis?'[71] Homer, too, was accused by many of distorting the history of the Trojan war by idealising the Greek cause, and of mixing historical truth with his fictions of the gods[72]. To such critics, the reader of fiction was giving his attention to matters which had no bearing on truth, and which disrupted any proper grasp of it. Clearly the problematic relationship of fiction to truth, be it historical, moral, or spiritual, was an issue of some concern to thinkers on the subject, and this concern is evident in their discussions of fictional narrative.

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71. *Gemma Animae*, *PL*, 172, 541-758, preface (cols 543-44).

72. See, for example, Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, trans. M.E. Meek (Bloomington, IA and London: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp.1-2. There is a general discussion of this question in Minnis & Scott, pp.113-16.

Isidore of Seville (d.636), in his *Etymologiae*, follows Cicero's distinction of two basic categories of fictional narrative, which are to be distinguished from the narration of literally true events found in history. The first of these is *fabula*, where the content is neither true nor possibly could be true. In this category would come fables in which beasts or inanimate objects were endowed with speech, and tales about mythical beasts or gods. The second category is *argumentum* wherein the content is untrue, but nonetheless credible, and under which would come any type of verisimilar narrative[73]. Conrad of Hirsau in his *Dialogus super Auctores*, makes a similar categorical distinction:

> Differunt autem Hesopi fabulae ad morum finem relatae et delectandi gratia confictae a commentis mendicabus Terentii, Plauti et aliorum similium poetarum, quia etsi aliquod modo veritati compendebat quod isti de negotiis humanarum rerum vel personarum confinxerunt, quod Hesopus confinxit nec fuit umquam nec fieri potuit.
>
> (pp.84-85)

Conrad's language seems somewhat contradictory at first sight: if the *argumenta* of these writers correspond with truth, even though only in a certain manner, then why does Conrad feel the need to label them as lies? What this reveals is a concern over the separateness of the fictional text from reality: an attitude which aims to contain the implications of that separateness by an act of mind which subordinates the text to a direct grasp of reality. Just as in medieval language theory the signifying function of language is defined as referential, controlled by the apprehension of a transcendent signified, unmediated and present to the mind in its totality, so the same is true of fiction. This is indicated by Conrad's definition of verisimilar fiction's relation to truth in terms of the possibility of its fictional narrative happening in real life. In this he locates the significance of the fictional text in a reality which is external to it, assessing it in terms which are felt to have their basis in reality. Such a process involves a translation of the significance of the contents of the narrative from their specific fictional context into a general context defined by the supposedly given characteristics of reality. Hence, the credibility of the fictional narrative, the quality by which its relation to

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73. Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), I, xliv, 5; Cicero, *De Inventione*, in *De Inventione; De Optimum Genere Oratorum; Topica*, trans. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp.55-6.

truth is defined, is located outside the text in the prior view of reality which determines just what is seen as being possible.

What this means is that elements which are seen as functioning only in terms of the fictionality of the text are not conceived as an integral part of its meaning. In determining the text's significance those elements which are peculiar to the text, with no external referent, are to be ignored. Only those elements which can be seen as holding a general relation to reality and whose significance therefore extends beyond the text are to be considered as pertinent. The conjunction of lies with a certain relation to truth which Conrad identifies in these writers can be seen as expressing this double aspect to the text: those elements of the *argumentum* which are seen only as imaginary constructs peculiar to the text lead such writings to be classified as lies, but those elements which it is felt can be related in general terms to a conception of reality allow it to be seen as corresponding with truth, even if only 'aliquod modi'.

The same holds true for *fabula*. Such narratives, with their lack of verisimilitude, are never positively evaluated in terms of their fictional content: this is either condemned or else seen as signifying some separate moral or historical truth. The fables of Aesop, for instance, were considered to be appropriate reading for a Christian, since their stories were felt to be so preposterous, and their moral significance so clear, that the reader would easily be able to extract what is meaningful and leave behind the frivolous fiction[74]. These attitudes can also be seen to underlie the criticisms of Homer's mixing history with fiction, wherein the narratives about the gods in his works are seen as merely a distraction, to be dismissed in extracting the truth which the texts presented. The idea that Homer was not trying to write history, and that the fictions are aesthetically speaking an integral part of his work, simply did not occur: a reading based on such a premise is utterly out of step with the Christian thought of the time, according to whose logic it deals with matters which are not worth serious consideration, but merely figments and frivolities. The fiction, therefore, is seen as irrelevant in itself and can only be valued as a sign of something other than itself: a reality to which the mind should turn, away from what is merely a figment or lie,

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74. See, for example, Augustine, *Contra Mendacium*, *PL*, 40, 517-48, XIII, xxviii, (col.538), and Boccaccio, *De Genealoge Deorum Gentilium Libri*, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols (Bari: G. Laterza, 1951), XIV, xiii (Vol.II, pp.717-723).

and hence insignificant. For since the significance of fictional meanings is defined solely by their textuality, having no actual referent outside language, then to pay attention to them in themselves would be to remain trapped within language. The objects of the mind would then be those which language had constructed, rather than those which actually exist.

This suspicion about the problematic relationship between fiction and reality and its disruption of the approved mode of perception is fundamental to the above attitudes towards fiction. As was observed above, the signifying process of language is validated by seeing it as governed by prior knowledge of reality. Thus, the communication of meaning through language involves the quasi-syllogistic combination of already known significations, combining them in such a way as to produce a new unified signification derived from their conjunction. But while this process, in order to be meaningful, involves producing new knowledge of reality from that which one already has, in fictional writing the process is different. For instance, a poet may combine the knowledge of what a horse is and what a man is and thus signify the concept of a centaur. But this process perverts our knowledge of reality by turning it to the production of figments: things which do not exist and which therefore lead the mind away from real things. Such figments can only be justified by seeing them as referring to something else. Thus, the centaur is seen to signify euhemeristically the horsemen of the Thessalians who, when riding about in battle, seemed to be of one body with their horses[75]. In this way the fiction is seen as signifying a reality which exists independently of it, to which it merely refers, and which can be contemplated without the need to give any attention to the fiction.

To contemplate fictions for their own sake, then, constitutes a disruption of the order of perception similar to that which ornate language is suspected of producing, distracting the mind from a contemplation of external truth (be it moral, spiritual, or empirical fact) and focusing it on what is merely a textual construct, not truth, and therefore a lie. And the consequences for the authority of the Church also remain the same: by encouraging delight in the representation of falsehoods and hence distracting attention from reality, fiction induces a response in its audience which usurps the dominance of a sense of a

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75. See Isidore, *Etymologiarum*, XI, iii, 37.

stable centre which should govern their responses. This usurpation undermines the view of reality and thought which the Christian curriculum sought to inculcate, and by means of which the Church validated its authority. Hence, those writings which risk bringing it about are regarded with suspicion and tend to be excluded from any serious status within that curriculum.

These concerns, with their emphasis on imaginative writing's disruption of any sense of unified truth, mirror those general concerns about language which medieval language theory aims to contain: the fundamental emphasis is on problems of signification, and on the relationship between language, reality, and the mind, in the problematic discourses of poetry and fiction. Scholastic literary theory, however, was able to overcome the doubts about such writings to a considerable degree. One can observe this in the way in which commentators in the later Middle Ages almost universally defined poetry as pertaining to ethics, and hence being relevant to philosophy. In the early Middle Ages any relation between philosophy and imaginative writing was drawn very tentatively and with great selectivity, as is witnessed by Macrobius's agonising over the problem in the passage already cited. In the later Middle Ages, however, the definition of poetry as pertaining to ethics became virtually axiomatic, indicating its heightened esteem among the Scholastics[76]. The general development of an increasingly favourable attitude towards poetry culminates in the fourteenth century with Boccaccio's assertion that poetry is theology and that theology is poetry, a view which links poetry to the highest stratum of knowledge and affords it a level of respect unheard of in the early Middle Ages[77].

Yet the reclamation which the Scholastics effected is not based in any attempt to define an autonomous value for poetry. Rather than challenging the conviction that only writing which conformed with the apprehension of truth was to be considered worthwhile, they accepted these terms of evaluation and set out to prove that imaginative literature fulfilled them. While their conclusions as to the significance of poetic and fictional language were very different from those of its earlier critics,

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76. See Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

77. *Short Treatise in Praise of Dante*, in Minnis & Scott, pp.492-503 (p.498).

their assumptions and premises as to the nature and value of language were the same. Through an analysis of the theoretical basis of the new modes of discussing and thinking about literature which they developed, I intend to show that the fundamental aim of their exegetical procedures and ideas about the function of literature is to extend the stabilising influence which their language theory provided for general discursive language so as to encompass potentially disruptive aspects of imaginative writing. Such an approach should reveal that the main difference between Scholastics and earlier thinkers in their thought on literature is that the Scholastics aimed at containment rather than dismissal; assimilation rather than exclusion.

Chapter Two

Per Grosse et Figuraliter: The Scholastic Reappraisal of Imaginative Writing

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For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To our doctrine it is ywrite, ywis.

(Chaucer, *Nun's Priest's Tale*)[1]

1

Scholastic apologists for literature sought to justify the study of secular and profane poetic texts by subordinating their meaning within a pre-ordained doctrinal and eschatological framework, thus countering the earlier criticisms which had been levelled at such writings. This was achieved in the first instance by the definition of poetry as an affective art form, which effectively dealt with the criticism of poetry as being inflammatory, since its operation on the affections was seen as working in common with edifying subject matter so as to move the audience to penitence and virtue. Secondly the subject matter of poetry was either moralised or allegorised. Thus, while fictional content was not seen as true in itself, it could be considered to pertain in some way to moral, spiritual or historical truth, either through exemplification or allegoresis.

The Scholastic application of these ways of conceiving literary texts is a novel and distinctive feature of medieval thought on such writing. While employing techniques such as allegoresis which had long been common exegetical practice, the Scholastics used them to unprecedented effect in revolutionising attitudes towards the value and authority of literature. Later in this chapter I will analyse in some detail exactly how the Scholastic definition of the nature and function of imaginative writing provided a powerful response to the earlier attitudes of suspicion. The chapter will close with a discussion of the relationship between medieval literature and its contemporary theory and a general indication of one of the most notable ways in which Scholastic literary theory informs medieval literature and is developed therein. This last will serve as a

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1. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), *Canterbury Tales*, VII, 3441-42 (p.261).

preface to the discussion in later chapters of how the works of Robert Henryson can be profitably analysed within the context of the Scholastic approach to literature. Firstly, however, it will be useful to analyse the underlying forces which facilitated the more positive late-medieval attitudes towards literature.

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Alistair Minnis has convincingly argued that the sense of value and authority which the Scholastics were able to attach to literature was facilitated by new features of Biblical exegesis which appeared in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries[2]. Fundamental to these features was an increasing emphasis on theology as primarily appealing to the emotions rather than to the rational faculties. Thus, while writers such as Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent (d.1293) persisted in emphasising the speculative and ratiocinative aspects of theology, other thirteenth-century thinkers such as Giles of Rome (d.1316) and Saint Bonaventure (d.1274) stressed the affective nature of the science. The argument behind this emphasis on the affective nature of divine science was that theology was aimed not merely at establishing knowledge of divine truth, but was intended to stimulate the love of the divine good and to inculcate the three cardinal virtues of faith, hope and charity. This could not be achieved by ratiocination alone, for this in itself does not move the affections, and futhermore, matters of faith, which is the foundation of these virtues, are ultimately above human reason. Rather, what was required was the stimulation and direction of the will to desire the good, so leading to virtuous action as the soul turned to the good on the basis of that desire[3].

Minnis suggests that once this was proposed it became possible to analyse the Bible with a new emphasis on its stylistic features. These features came to be seen as working in collaboration with the truths which it conveyed, so as to move the audience to virtue[4]. Some earlier

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2. See *Authorship*, esp. pp.118-45.
3. See ibid., pp.119-22.
4. Ibid., p.144, 'Once the suggestion had been made that theology might be basically affective, no theologian could avoid considering those aspects of rhetoric and poetics which Alexander of Hales and his successors had deemed appropriate to the subject.' For a general account see pp.123-45.

writers, certainly, had argued that stylistic features and secular learning in general were relevant to the study of Bible. Cassiodorus (d.c.580), in his *Institutiones Divinarum Litterarum*, states that 'in sacris litteris quam in expositoribus doctissimis multa per schemata, multa per definitiones, multa per artem grammatica, multa per artem rhetorica [...] intelligere possumus.'[5] But Cassiodorus' treatment of these subjects is cursory, and far from complete in its detail. What is more, the section of his *De Artibus ac Disciplinis Liberalium* in which he deals with the arts of discourse found in the trivium is extremely brief, taking up very little of the work, and receiving an even more cursory treatment in his treatise on sacred letters[6]. The later Middle Ages found a much more far-reaching and systematic extension of these branches of learning into the study of the Bible.

This tendency can be seen in the *Summa Theologiae* of Alexander of Hales (d.1245), in which he examines the question of whether or not the scriptures utilise multiple stylistic and significative modes[7]. Among other arguments Alexander proposes that truth must be conveyed in such a way as to take into account the diverse conditions of those who make up its audience:

> The conditions (status) of men are manifold: in the time of the Law, in the time after the Law, in the time of prophecy, in the time of grace. Even within those periods the conditions of men are manifold. For some are sluggish in matters relating to faith, some are rebellious in matters relating to good morality, and [fall short] in different ways. Some pass their lives in prosperity, some in adversity, some in good works, some in sin. The conclusion must be drawn that the teaching of Holy Scripture, which has been ordained for the salvation of men, must employ a multiple mode, so that the mode matches the objective.
>
> (Minnis & Scott, p.219)

This stress on the need to take account of audience reflects ideas already associated with rhetorical theory, where the rhetor had to consider the nature of his hearers in choosing the discourse most appropriate to his persuasive effect. The needs of a specific audience are thus seen to be met by tailoring the stylistic and significative modes appropriately.

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5. Flavius Cassiodorus Senator, *De Institutione Divinarum Litterarum*, *PL*, 70, 1105-49, I, xxi, 1, (col.1140).

6. Cassiodorus' discussion of rhetoric and grammar can be found in *De Artibus ac Disciplinis Liberalium*, *PL* 70, 1149-1220, I-II (cols 1152-67). For a brief discussion of his work in its connection to the study of the trivium, see Murphy, *Rhetoric*, pp.64-7.

7. Translated excerpts are to be found in Minnis & Scott, pp.212-23.

Hence, rather than rejecting formal stylistic qualities as inappropriate for the pious mind, exegetes came to see the Bible as embodying all these features, and, indeed, to surpass secular writing in its utilisation of them. Thus, where St Jerome contrasts the eloquence of Cicero and Plautus with the unadorned style ('sermo [...] incultis') of the prophets[8], an anonymous late-medieval commentator on *Lamentations* acually cites Cicero to help explain the stylistic form of the Biblical text[9].

Despite this increasing convergence of approaches to scripture and poetry, thirteenth-century exegetes were still inclined to draw a clear distinction between the two. I have already observed Aquinas' separation of poetic metaphors from those employed in the Bible, and Albertus Magnus (d.1280) makes a similar distinction[10]. But, as is clear from statements such as Boccaccio's which compare poetry and theology, later thinkers afforded poetry a much greater respect. Once the stylistic modes of poetry had been seen to be consonant with the doctrinal concerns of Christian faith, and the methods of analysis associated with them found to be of value in Biblical exegesis, then it became possible to see them as much less out of step with Christian faith. If the very features which had led to poetry being condemned for rousing the passions were now seen to be employed in sacred scripture, then those features were no longer in themselves a reason for shunning poetry. Hence, when allied to an edifying subject matter, poetry could much more readily be afforded serious consideration.

Given the new emphasis on the utility of poetic modes in their perceived use in the Bible, the reservations which many Christians held towards literary discouse seemed to dissipate. With the new authority which the techniques of imaginative writing had acquired, those concepts which had in earlier times been employed to lend some justification to poetic literature came to have a much more far-reaching impact. Many late-medieval thinkers espoused the view that secular poetic texts offered edifying subject matter either through the exemplification of moral values, or through their containment of valuable meanings beneath a fictional *integumentum* or veil. This theory was an ancient one in the

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8. *Epistola* XXII, *PL*, 22, 394-425, xxx (col.416).
9. Cited in *Authorship*, p.133, 262n.
10. Albertus Magnus, *Summa Theologia*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Bernhard Geyer, et al. (Monasterii Westfalorum: Aschendorff, 1951-) I, v, 2, (Vol.XXXI, pp.23-4).

study of literary texts, being found even in the Classical period, and had been utilised by medieval scholars in, for example, the twelfth-century *accessus ad auctores*[11]. But in the earlier Middle Ages such approaches had been joined to a suspicion of the superfluity of the fictional elements which only served to distract from the truth. It was this suspicion which led to Macrobius's careful and exacting distinctions of suitable from unsuitable fictions, and to the stress among many early-medieval thinkers on such writing's suitability only for beginners on the first step of the ladder to knowledge. With the new emphasis on the value of imaginative modes of writing in Biblical texts, however, the delight which the fictional veil stirred was no longer seen as mere frivolity, but as an enticement to study and an aid to understanding. Hence, Ulrich of Strassburg, writing in the latter part of the thirteenth century, states that 'philomythos, id est poeta amans fingere fabulas, philosophus est eo, quod poeta ad hoc fingit fabulam, ut excitet ad admirandum et admiratio ulterius excitet ad inquirendum et sic constet scientia [..][12]. The fictional veil thus became no longer a mere unnecessary appendage to the text, but was harmonised within a model of reception wherein response was seen to consist of an opening of the intellect to appetitive stimulation.

The application by the Scholastics of these ways of looking at poetry constitutes a considerable departure from the attitudes found in the earlier Middle Ages, with the emphasis on its affective nature and its classification under ethics giving it a utility and truth value which earlier critics had not allowed. But while the specific details of these approaches to literature constitute a distinctive and novel development in medieval literary theory, they also have a much wider significance. These particular developments are located within the general concerns of medieval scholars over the nature of language as it pertained to the certitude which could be attached to meaning. Where earlier critics had felt imaginative writing to fit ill with the assumptions about language and meaning which underpinned the authority of Christian doctrine, the Scholastic approach overcomes these objections and aligns the

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11. See John MacQueen, *Allegory* (London and New York: Methuen, 1970), p.46. On the classical and early-medieval traditions, see pp.1-17, 46-58.

12. Ulrich of Strassburg, *De Summa Bono Liber 1*, ed. Burkhard Mojsisch (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1989), II, ix (p.52).

significative structure of imaginative writing with that propounded in the dominant view of language.

3

The ramifications of this new conception of the structure of poetry are manifold and complex, but they are notably exemplified in the commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* by Averroes of Cordova (d.1198), translated into Latin from Arabic by Hermann the German in 1256[13]. The poetic theory outlined therein differs very much from that of the genuine Aristotle. To emphasise more clearly these differences I will glance briefly at the Aristotelian version, before examining the Averroistic text.

While Aristotle's *Poetics* defines poetry as a mimesis or imitation, implying resemblance, it nevertheless does so in terms which emphasise the text's aesthetic autonomy. Plot is seen as the most important part and is defined as an ordering of incidents which form a causal sequence:

> We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes: beginning and end in it must be of the form just described.[14]

The fittingness of the qualities of character and thought, and of the various incidents presented, is then defined in terms of their place within this causal ordering:

> The right thing [...] is in the characters just as in the incidents of the play to seek after the necessary or the probable; so that whenever such-and-such a personage says or does such-and-such a

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13. *Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Medium in Aristoteles Poetrium*, ed. W.F. Boggess (Ph.D thesis: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1965).

14. *Poetics*, 1450b. All quotations from the *Poetics* are from I. Bywater's translation, printed in vol.2 of *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathon Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.2316-2341. References for all Aristotle's works are to the page numbers of Immanuel Bekker's Berlin edition of Aristotle. This edition is used by scholars as a general reference system, and all the editions from which I quote employ it in their margins.

> thing, it shall be the necessary or probable outcome of his character; and whenever this incident follows on that, it shall be either the necessary or probable consequence of it.
>
> (1454a)

A plot constructed along these lines, however, is seen as different from the order of events found in history:

> A history has to deal not with one action, but with one period and all that happened in that to one or more persons, however disconnected the several events may have been. Just as two events may take place at the same time, eg. the sea-fight off Salamis and the battle with the Carthaginians in Sicily, without converging to the same end, so too of two consecutive events one may sometimes come after the other with no one end as their common issue.
>
> (1459a)

A poem, therefore, is not seen simply as a verisimilar reproduction of reality. Rather, it imitates in its teleological structure an underlying principle of entelechy which Aristotle sees as the central structure of reality[15]. As he states in his *Physics*[16], 'where there is an end, the successive things which go before are done for it. As things are done, so they are by nature such as to be, and as they are by nature so as to be, so are they done, if there is no impediment.' (199a) The changes and developments which by nature take place in material things are seen as orientated towards a final end, in the same way as in logical investigation premises are orientated towards a conclusion (198b). In physical objects and beings, change which takes place in matter contributes to the full realisation of a form which exists potentially in the changing thing, and which is the essence of its being. The actualisation of this form is the logical and ontological consequence of that change, and, indeed, a motivating force for it. Aristotle thus sees the world as composed of innumerable diverse actions, which have in common this process of entelechy as their motivating and organising principle. And, in fact, the concept of entelechy pervades his whole philosophy, being fundamental to his conception of the relationship between matter and form, between existence and essence, and between the particular and the universal[17].

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15. See Jonathon Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.16-20, 33-50.

16. *Physics*, trans. W. Charlton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

17. See Lear, *passim*. Lear's whole book examines the functions of the process of entelechy in the different parts of Aristotle's philosophy. Hence the title: man's natural desire to understand is seen as a tendency towards a perfection of form, the act of thought being what is highest in humanity.

By defining the unifying principle of reality in such a manner, however, Aristotle introduces a certain disunity and lack of order into his world view. Each distinct process of entelechy is seen as developing independently from the others, as Aristotle makes clear in his comments on history. Diverse operations are seen as unconnected in their unfolding, and what is more, should they come into contact they may clash and conflict in their different courses. Aristotle expressly states that any natural development may meet with an 'impediment', and comments that 'mistakes are possible in the operations of nature' (199a), so that any one teleological development may go awry. Hence, while reality may be ordered according to a common principle, the connections and interactions between the different parts of reality are seen as fitting with no intelligible order: Aristotle is only able to classify them as something going wrong. Thus, although Aristotle's theory aims to define reality as an intelligible unity, it also presents each distinct entity or action as independent and self-contained, so involving a large degree of heterogeneity in his world view.

The view of poetry expounded in the *Poetics* displays a similar disjunction to that within the ontology on which it is based. Aristotle bases his claims as to poetry's universality on the mimesis in its causal structure of the principles of reality operative in natural things, dependent on the perception of a resemblance between imitation and imitated. But by giving precedence to the plot structure which through its organising principle achieves this mimesis, Aristotle also focuses attention on the text as a unique object, displaying a distinctive narrative order proper to itself. With plot as the predominant part of tragedy, the characters, thoughts and incidents of the plot then become seen as meaningful primarily in their resonance within a particular action, realised only within the fictional framework of the text. Hence, Aristotle's theory emphasises the particularities of a poem, presenting it as a thing in itself, rather than as part of a wider system of interrelationships. In this way, while aiming to draw resemblances, Aristotelian mimesis also tends to distinguish the imitation from the imitated, and to insist that the imitation be seen in terms of what is proper to itself. The text thus appears as a distinctive verbal object, frustrating any attempt to define it in simply referential terms. As Judson Boyce Allen comments in *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle*

Ages, 'the genuine doctrine of Aristotle distinguishes poetry from, rather than relates it to, defines it as itself, rather than as an organic part of a larger system.' (p.185)

Such a view of poetry, with its emphasis on the autonomy of poetic meaning, and its distinctness from any external reality, would obviously be anathema to the medieval sensibility, with its ubiquitous concern about the relationship between poetry and the real world. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Averroistic version of the *Poetics* should depart considerably from Aristotle's version. Rather than simply being a misunderstanding of Aristotle, the points of difference can be shown to be a consistent interpretative strategy in the medieval version, recasting those aspects of the original which foreground the importance of the text in determining meaning, and thus rendering it amenable to the views of Christian thinkers.

This can be demonstrated from an analysis of the passage dealing with the six parts of tragedy[18]:

> Et oportet ut tragedie, idest artis laudandi, sex partes sunt, scilicet sermones fabulares representativi, et consuetudines, et metrum seu pondus, et credulitates, et consideratio, et thonus. Et signum huius est quoniam omnis sermo poeticus dividitur in assimilationem et in id per quod fit assimilatio et ea per que fit assimilatio - tria sunt: representatio et metrum et thonus. Et ea que assimilantur in laudando etiam tria sunt: consuetudines, et credulitates, et consideratio, idest probatio recte credulitatis. Sunt itaque necessario partes tragedie sex, et partes majores carminis laudativi sunt consuetudines et credulitates. Tragedia etenim non est ars representiva ipsorummet hominem prout sunt individua cadentia in sensum, sed est representativa consuetudinem eorum honestarum et actionem laudabilium et credulitatum beatificantium. Et consuetudines comprehendunt actiones et mores: ideoque ponitur consuetudo una sex partium et per eius positionem excusatur positio actionum et morum in illa divisione, Consideratio autem est declaratio recte credulitatis per quam homo laudabilis existit. [...] Et representant hoc tria, scilicet consuetudines, credulitates et significationes, per tres maneries

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18. There are several important discussions of the Averroistic *Poetics*. Particularly noteworthy are W.F. Boggess, 'Hermannus Alemannus' Rhetorical Translations', *Viator* 2 (1971), 227-50; H.A. Kelly, 'Aristotle-Averroes-Allemanus on Tragedy: The Influence of the *Poetics* in the Middle Ages', *Viator* 10 (1979) 161-209. Judson Boyce Allen discusses the text in *The Ethical Poetic*, and his understanding of it is probably closest to my own. For his comments on the discussion of the six parts of tragedy, see pp.22-38. See also his rather more brief 'Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle and Medieval Poetic Theory', *Mosaic* 9 (1976), 67-81.

> rerum per quas fit representatio, scilicet sermonem imaginativum et metrum et tonum.
>
> (pp.19-20)

The first term distinguished by Averroes, 'sermones fabulares representativi', is later in the passage termed simply 'representatio'. This is significant, since 'fabulares' denotes fictional material, while 'representativi' and 'representatio' imply some referential aspect to the discourse. The fictional elements of poetry are thus being traced to an external reality, anchoring poetic signification outside the realms of textuality and literary convention. This same first part of tragedy is also designated in the passage by the term 'sermonem imaginativum'. This draws a connection between the fictional discourse of the text and the mental faculty of the imagination. The various terms used for this first part of tragedy thus locate the text within a system of relationships wherein it interacts with an external reality and with the human mind. In this it encapsulates the fundamental characteristics of the Averroistic *Poetics* and of Scholastic literary attitudes in general.

This can be demonstrated through analysis of the remaining specified parts. Of these, *consuetudo*, *credulitas*, and *consideratio* relate most directly to the relationship between the poetic text and external reality. *Consuetudo* and *credulitas* are defined, *pace* Aristotle, as the most important parts of tragedy, while plot has disappeared from the list (a fact which is itself significant), becoming absorbed, it seems, within the more general *sermones fabulares*[19]. These two terms correspond respectively to Aristotle's character and thought. *Consuetudines*, however, translates as 'customs' rather than character, suggesting a more general reference, as Judson Boyce Allen points out:

> The Aristotelian terms 'plot' and 'character' emphasise the particular; whatever universal quality or impression one may in the end reach, its essence is the existence and significance of a particular action, at a particular time, by particular persons. Averroes is just the reverse; whatever is particular in poetry is

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19. Most critics and translators tend to identify *sermones fabulares* with the Aristotelian 'plot'. Judson Boyce Allen, however, states that such an identification is incorrect, and that 'plot' has been ousted by 'consuetudines' (see *Mosaic* 9, p.67). My view lies somewhere in between. *Sermones fabulares* can certainly not be *identified* with plot, being much more general, and including any sort of fictional description, be it of a static object or a chain of events. I do, however, think that plot is included under this heading on account of its consisting of a merely particular causal sequence, which leads it to be afforded the lack of significance attributed to fiction in general. My reasons for this should become clear as my argument progresses.

> exemplary rather than essential. The real essence of poetry is something universal. The particulars of which, empirically, representation must be made are instrumental, not absolute; their presence has normative overtones which they define but do not dominate.
>
> (*Ethical Poetic*, p.27)

This defines the emphasis which is central to Averroes' consideration of poetic signification, indicated when it is stated that poetry depicts 'consuetudinem [...] honestarum et actionem laudabilim et credulitatem beatificantium.' The appended adjectives presume a set of absolute moral standards which provide a frame of reference within which customs, actions and beliefs can indeed be said to be truly honest, praiseworthy and beatifying. The replacing of plot as the dominant structural characteristic of poetry removes that which emphasises meaning as determined within the fictional framework of a particular text. The definition of praiseworthy *consuetudines* and *credulitates* as being the primary features of imaginative writing gives poetic meaning a basis in transcendent reality.

This becomes clear in the discussion of *consideratio*. According to Averroes, this is 'declaratio recte credulitatis per quam homo laudabilis existit.' Later he defines it as 'argumentio seu probatio rectitudinis credulitatis aut operationis [...] per sermonem representativum.' (p.23) Both these definitions suggest that the conviction or 'probatio' which *consideratio* provides is something to do with the effectiveness of the language employed: the first describes it as 'declaratio recte', while the final clause of the second could be interpreted as implying that it is the 'sermonem representativum' which establishes the conviction implied by 'probatio'. It is certainly the case that language plays an important part in convincing an audience (a point to which I shall return later), but were this exclusively the case then the Averroistic *Poetics* would be reducing poetry to mere sophistry. In fact, *consideratio* is defined as 'assimilationem', rather than something 'per quod fit assimilatio'. This clearly indicates that the quality which it denotes is seen as being more than a mere product of language, and is felt to be an intrinsic part of the content of poetry.

The type of proof denoted by *consideratio* can thus be seen as the perception of a definitive quality of 'rightness' evident in the delineated *consuetudines* and *credulitates*: that is to say, the particular representations of the poetic text have a perceptible universal resonance

in terms of an absolute moral framework. The importance of this fact becomes clear when Averroes substitutes the term *significationes* for *consideratio*. This identifies *consideratio* with a text's meaningfulness, indicating that this universal resonance is central to the conception of how a text is intelligible. Meaningfulness is seen to depend on the possibility of tracing the *consuetudines* and *credulitates* of a text to an external and universal truth. Thus, in the Averroistic text the meaningfulness of these parts of a poem is determined not by their relative functions and relationships formulated within the fictional framework of the text. Rather, their significance obtains from the absolute moral values which are seen to exist outside the text, and which the text serves to point towards. This much is stated elsewhere in the commentary:

> Et terminis substantialis sive intellegere faciens substantiam artis laudandi est quoniam ipsa est assimilatio et representatio operationis voluntarie virtuose complete que habet potentiam universalem in rebus virtuosis, non potentiam particularem in unaquaque rerum virtuosarum.
>
> (p.16)

The fictional particulars of the text are thus seen not to play the central role in constructing meaning which they do in the genuine Aristotle. Their function is, as Allen points out, an instrumental one, serving to point to a truth located in external reality.

Thus, the causal connections between particular characters and events within a specific plot are denied any dominant role in establishing a text's meaning, in much the same way as John of Salisbury and Bernard of Chartres subordinate the significative function of syntax to a discrete extra-linguistic signified. To emphasise connections which belong merely to a particular action would be to lose sight of the universal verities under which all things are organised, placing the contingent before the absolute, the sensible before the intelligible. That such an inclination was not commonly embraced in the literary thought of the Middle Ages can be seen in how unimportant plot structure was felt to be among writers of the time, evident in their willingness to interrupt their narratives with long digressions and extensive descriptions whose presence breaks the flow of the story. Witness in Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*, written in the fifteenth century, the description of the procession of birds, which continues for some five hundred and seven lines, with one

hundred and sixty nine of these being devoted to a digression on the noble deeds of Douglas, the companion of Robert the Bruce[20]. Similarly, in the fourteenth-century *Bruce*, John Barbour frequently abandons the story to insert his narratorial digressions[21]. Such practice stems from an established habit of considering a text in a way which sets little store by the sequential ordering of a self-contained narrative structure. Instead, the text is always referred to an external and independent meaning.

This outlook is indicated by the truth claims made by medieval romances, of the sort mocked by Chaucer in his *Tale of Sir Thopas* and in other of his works[22]. There seems to be no sense of contradiction between the claims to historical accuracy and the overtly fabulous conventions associated with romances. Thus, the opening passage of Barbour's *Bruce* asserts that the story is historical truth, yet Barbour feels free to embellish it with all the trappings of a medieval romance, with no sense of conflict between literary convention and truth[23]. What such claims assume, and what makes it possible for them to be seriously proposed, is that the superlative actions represented in romance constitute not simply a literary ideal, separate from reality, but the representation of a mode of existence in conformity with real universal values, and enacted by the great men of the past. Such actions thus represent not the illusions of art, meaningful within the conventions of the genre, but a way of life which is most fully consonant with the metaphysical structure of reality, raising a particular existence to the level of the universal. It is in terms of this relation between the particular and the universal, rather than in terms of its status as an imaginative construct, that a text achieves its meaning. As Judson Boyce Allen observes:

> All exemplary existences inhabit, ultimately, the same world; to the extent that one's submission to the ethical *consideratio* of a poem permitted one to achieve a normative resonance, a relation to

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20. Richard Holland, *The Buke of the Howlat*, in Priscilla Bawcutt and Felicity Riddy, eds, *Longer Scottish Poems Volume One: 1375-1670* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), 157-663. For the Douglas section, see 378-546.

21. *Barbour's Bruce: A Fredome is a Noble Thing*, ed. M.P. McDiarmid, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1981). See, for example, I, 41-48, 445-476, and IV, 668-769 (Vol.I).

22. See *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, *CT*, VII, 713, 749 (p.213). See also *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, VII, 3211-12 (p.258).

23. *Bruce*, I, 12-20.

> *credulitas* and *consuetudo*, one would exist as a part of that constitution of definition.
>
> (*Ethical Poetic*, p.34)

Thus, the theory of exemplification outlined in the Averroistic *Poetics*, in establishing the order of poetic signification as involving the subordination of the structure of a particular text to the certainties of an external reality, serves to bring poetry into conformity with the view of signification outlined in medieval language theory, and with the metaphysical structure of reality which it mirrors. The concern of earlier medieval thinkers over poetic signification's separateness from any external truth, and over the problems this presents for the orthodox view of reality and thought, is thus alleviated. Poetry and truth are reconciled.

4

While I am of the opinion that the ways of thinking about imaginative literature evident in the Averroistic *Poetics* are typical of Scholasticism in general, it must be admitted that it is atypical in denigrating fabulous poetry, and in ignoring allegoresis in favour of an exemplative theory of literature[24]. However, it can be demonstrated that medieval allegorical exegesis displays the same attitudes towards text and interpretation as are found in the Averroistic theory, and that what makes exemplative poetry acceptable to that theory is precisely what makes fabulous poetry acceptable among the Scholastics in general.

An indication of this is that allegorical interpretations of poetic texts display precisely the same lack of concern for the text as an arbiter of meaning, in fact displaying no desire to preserve a consistency between their interpretation and the apparent sense of a poem. Thus, in his *Reductorium Morale*, written mid-fourteenth century, Pierre Bersuire feels free to abandon any consideration of story or style, stating 'non intendo nisi rarissime litteralum sensum fabularum tangere', instead choosing to concentrate on moral and allegorical exposition[25]. In the 'De Formis Figuris et Imaginibus Deorum' which prefaces his exposition of

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24. Boccaccio, for one, seems to afford privilege to the most outrageously fictional tales. See *De Genealoge Deorum Gentilium*, XIV, xiii (Vol.II, p.718).

25. Book XV of the *Reductorium Morale*, the *Ovidus Moralizatus*, is available in a facsimile version as *Metamorphosis Ovidiana Moraliter...Explanata*, ed. S. Orget (Paris 1509; repr. New York and London: Garland, 1979), prologue.

the text, he says that Diana may be interpreted as the Blessed Virgin, or as an evil woman who leads men astray using temptation and lust, or as avarice[26]. Similarly, in his exposition of the Orpheus narrative, having briefly sketched the story, his interpretation makes Orpheus represent Christ, the good preacher, the saints and learned men of the early church, and the sinner[27]. This willingness to offer contradictory interpretations of the same character reveals that such exegesis does not proceed by trying to draw a relation of consonance between the particulars of the text and the adduced meaning. The interpretations offered are free to ignore the resonances of a character within the text: it suffices that the interpretation offered is consonant with Christian doctrine. As Judson Boyce Allen observes, 'the relation between a fictional story and its spiritual meanings [...] holds, not because there exists some arguable relation between the letter and the spirit - but rather because the meaning adduced is itself true.'[28]

That this tendency to ignore plot structure and narrative context rests on a fundamental quality of medieval thought can be seen from one of the basic procedures of medieval interpretation; the analysis of the *divisio textus*. This process was crucial to medieval critics, who saw the analysis of the divisions of a text as central to any understanding of it, as is indicated by Hugh of St Victor's assertion that 'modus legendi in dividendo constat' (*Didascalicon*, III, 9). Thus Robert Kilwardby remarks in his discussion of Aristotle's *Praedicamenta* that 'since we only know a composite from our knowledge of its parts, and of their nature, and since that book is composed of parts, therefore we must not be ignorant of what parts, and what sort of parts, it is composed.'[29] He then proceeds to provide a detailed and meticulous analaysis of the *divisio textus*, of a sort which is very much typical of analyses of textual division. The divisions extended from books to chapters to parts of chapters. It seems that the more divisions one could discern in a text the more thorough one's understanding of it was felt to be[30].

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26. Ibid, 'De formis Figuris et Imaginibus Deorum', vii.

27. Ibid, X, A-F.

28. *The Friar as Critic: Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Nashville, TE: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971).

29. Cited in *Authorship*, p.149.

30. Thus Dante, in his commentary to the *Vita Nuova* xix, states that 'to uncover still more meaning in this *canzone* it would be necessary to divide it more

Judson Boyce Allen notes that the divisions identified by medieval exegetes are primarily sententious rather than based on aesthetic proportioning (*Ethical Poetic*, p.130). Similarly, Mary Carruthers, in *The Book of Memory*, identifies the marking of divisions by punctuation as a mnemonic device, each segment thus divided having a discrete and noteworthy significance[31]. This means that each distinct part of a text, while it participates in the system of relationships which makes up the whole, can also be considered in isolation from the others:

> Division tends to distinguish parts which are themselves whole, in a way which as named and distinguished, is quite static. Medieval parts relate additively, not dynamically; therefore medieval distinction and definition of parts tends quite naturally to identify parts appropriate to this additive kind of relationship. A particularly neat example of this tendency is Bersuire's way of dividing Ovid's fables for allegorisation - the result of his analysis is a set of discrete parts of a narrative plot, which exist as more or less independent events, each having its own meaning.
>
> (*Ethical Poetic*, pp.138-39)

The process of division thus tends to disrupt the dynamic relationships established within the narrative structure of the text and so undermines the significance of the parts of a poem as they relate within the fictional framework of the plot. Their significance hence becomes determined by virtue of the sententious division which assigns each part one or more referents outside the text.

The parts of a text thus divided could then form *distinctiones*, in which are listed a range of possible meanings applicable to the subject of a particular *divisione*. It has been observed that while *distinctione* collections are not given a formal designation until the later Middle Ages, this represents a systemisation of procedures which were already in use, extending back to the fifth century[32]. And, in fact, the *distinctione* is clearly central to the long-standing tradition of Biblical exegesis *in bono*

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minutely.' See *Vita Nuova*, trans. B. Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp.58-59.

31. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

32. On the history and nature of the *distinctione*, see M.A. Rouse and R.H. Rouse, 'Biblical Distinctiones in the Thirteenth Century', *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 41 (1974), 27-37 (pp.28-29). For discussion of the relation between *distinctiones* and *divisiones* see M.B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1992), pp.21-22, 303-4. For discussion of the sententious basis of the divisions marked by medieval punctuation, see Parkes, pp.65-76.

and *in malo*. This can be seen in the contradictory interpretations offered by Peter of Poitiers in his *Distinctiones super Psalterum*. He glosses the word *lectus* (bed) in Psalm 6 with a sevenfold *distinctione*: it refers to sacred scripture, contemplation, the Church, conscience, carnal pleasure, eternal damnation, and eternal beatitude[33]. Pierre Bersuire provides another example in his *Reportorium Morale*, in which he interprets the ram mentioned in the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Genesis* 22 as Christ the Redeemer, Christ the Defender, the just precept, and the carnal sinner[34]. The alternative significations proposed here are not seen in any way to impinge on each other: the fact that the same goat should represent vice and virtue implies no confusion in the understanding. As with the *distinctiones* already seen in Bersuire's interpretations of Ovid, the various interpretations offered constitute discrete meanings existing independently of the text.

By dividing the text and allocating meanings to its parts in this manner medieval exegetes avoid any sense of a merely textual unity being the governor of signification. Rather than being determined by their resonances within a dynamic narrative order realised only within the framework of the text, the various significations offered for each part form a network of possible meanings within which each signification of any one *distinctione* may be related to any of the significations offered for the other parts. Nor do all the parts need to be taken into account. In his interpretation of the Orpheus narrative in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, William of Aragon ignores the conclusion, vastly important for the story, where Orpheus looks back at Eurydice and thus loses her[35]. As Alistair Minnis notes, he does this 'presumably because of the difficulty of finding anything blameworthy about eloquence looking back at good judgement'[36], but this is perfectly permissible, since from the medieval viewpoint the conclusion merely constitutes one element among others, rather than an essential part of the poem's meaning. The only rigid constraint on this exegetical process is the limits set by Christian doctrine. Whatever is conformable to it is valid.

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33. Cited in Philip S. Moore, *The Works of Peter of Poitiers: Master of Theology and Chancellor of Paris (1193-1205)* (Notre Dame, IA: University of Notre Dame Press, 1936), p.79.

34. Cited in Gellrich, p.133.

35. See Minnis & Scott, pp.332-336 (pp.333-34).

36. Ibid., p.320.

From this perspective, then, the fictional details of a poem are seen as making no essential contribution to meaning. This is confirmed by Boccaccio's assertion that 'poetarum fictiones nulli adhereant specierum mendacii, eo quod non sit mentis eorum quenquam fingendo fallere; nec, uti mendacium est, fictiones poetice, ut plurimum, non sunt nedum simillime, sed nec similes veritati, imo valde dissone et adverse.'[37] For Boccaccio, far from determining meaning, a poem's fictional elements serve as a bulwark against giving undue notice to such elements, being so obviously untrue that they will mislead no-one. Fictionality is thus viewed as a guard against that most pernicious form of misreading which loses sight of the true basis of meaning, serving to direct audience attention away from itself to a truth whose basis lies outside the text, within the realm of truth which Christian doctrine mediates and defines for humanity, but does not construct. For the allegorists as with Averroes, though in a different way, imaginative writing is made conformable to the standard view of linguistic signification, having its significative structure firmly placed under the governance of a prior and subsistent meaning.

This insistence on meaning's absolute exteriority to textuality also has the effect of throwing emphasis onto the audience, since, given the innumerable possible allegorical permutations of the text, any interpretation exists only as one among others, all of which can be equally valid. That which justifies the selection of one interpretation rather than another must therefore be its moral appropriateness for given readers, rather than any merely aesthetic or textual criteria. Scholastic allegoresis thus stresses a view of reception wherein particular readers can select appropriate interpretations from a homogeneous body of meaning founded in the totality of a complex but unified reality, their particular requirements as readers being determined by their position within that totality. In this way Scholastic allegoresis further reaffirms a sense of how the basis of meaning transcends the limits of the situation in which it is uttered, locating contingent circumstance within the absolute certainty of an encompassing and informing *ordo*.

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37. See above, p.51, n.24.

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While poetic signification is in this way reappropriated for Christian truth, there nevertheless remains a question of what purpose the fictional and formal aspects of the text are actually felt to serve. If privilege is afforded to external truth, then surely it could be simply stated without the distractions which imaginative writing seems to involve. This brings me to the second aspect of the Averroistic *Poetics*: the connection between the text and the human mind. It is in this respect that Averroes' theory relates to the affective tradition in the later Middle Ages. This can be seen from the definitions of *credulitas* and *consideratio*. Initially Averroes implies that *credulitates* are the beliefs of the characters presented in tragedy, indicating this when he states that 'consideratio [...] est declaratio recte credulitatis per quam homo laudabilis existit.' Clearly, the *credulitates* which *assimilantur* are here seen as belonging to the praiseworthy protagonist. Yet later in the passage *credulitas* is defined in very different terms:

> Et pars tertia tragedie est credulitas, et hec est potentia representandi rem sic esse aut non sic esse. Et hoc est simile et quod conatur rhetorica in declaratione quod res existat aut non existat, nisi quod rhetorica conatur ad hoc per sermonum persuasivum et poetria per sermonum representativum.
> (pp.21-22)

Here, as the comparison with rhetoric makes clear, *credulitas* is defined in relation to the audience; in fact, as a belief generated in the mind of the audience. But *credulitas*, as we have seen, is something which is likened or imitated. What this suggests is that in some sense the audience is seen as falling within the boundaries of the text's content.

This can also be seen from the term *consideratio*, which is 'argumentio seu probatio rectitudinis credulitatis aut operationis.' *Consideratio*, while connected in some way with language, is also, as I have already observed, one of the things which is likened. Hence, the audience's conviction of the rectitude of a belief or deed is once again seen as in some way intrinsic to the content of poetry. This extension of poetry into the minds of the audience indicates the affective function which it is felt to serve:

> Differentia inter sermonem poeticum preceptivum et instigativum ad credulitates et preceptivum et instigativum ad consuetudines

> est quoniam ille qui instigat ad consuetudines instigat ad operandum et agendum aliquid aut recedendum et fugiendum ab eo. Sermo vero qui instigat ad credulitatem non instigat nisi ad credendum aliquid esse aut non esse, sed non ad inquirendum ipsum aut respuendum.
>
> (p.22)

The represented *consuetudines* and *credulitates* extend into the deeds and thoughts of the audience as either praiseworthy actions and beliefs, or the avoidance of vicious ones (the latter being instigated in comedy, or the art of blaming, since tragedy is the art of praise). Literary representation is thus seen as translating into virtuous behaviour.

For Averroes, the affective power of poetry seems to derive in part from the universal resonance considered to be perceptible in the represented qualities. The effect which this has on the audience appears to be based on a perceived proportional analogy between these qualities and the structure of the mind. Thus, Giles of Rome comments that 'the thoughts and affections of the will do not deviate from that harmony and those proportions which men follow in striving to achieve good works grounded in virtue'[38], and as Aquinas observes, the will naturally embraces that in which it sees its own form mirrored (*ST*, II-II, q.10 art.2). The virtue of an act is seen to be ascertained by the audience's natural perception of its intrinsic consonance with truth. Thus, since the mind naturally tends to embrace what it sees to be good, when the members of the audience perceive the relation between fact and truth which a poem manifests they are moved to assimilate what is represented, making it the criterion for their own actions and thoughts. This implies a powerful faith in the relationship between sensible and intelligible reality, between the particular and the universal, and in the harmonious correlation between this relationship and the human mind. But Averroes makes it clear that while having a substantial basis in reality, the affective process is also facilitated by the use of poetic images and ornate language.

The connection between poetic likening and the audience's tendency to virtue is drawn quite explicitly in another passage:

> Et est quidem representatio seu imitatio sustenamentum et fundamentum in hac arte propterea quod non fit delectatio ex rememoratione rei cuius intenditur remomeratio absque sui

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38. *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, excerpted and translated in Minnis & Scott, pp.243-47 (p.244).

> representatione, sed fit delectatio quidem et receptio ipsius quando representata fuerit.
>
> (p.21)

Later, it is stated that poetry achieves its persuasive effects 'per sermonem representativum.' (p.22) The representations of the fictional framework of the text clearly are felt to play an important part in the affective power of the text. This is indicated by the assertion that they inspire 'delectatio quidem et receptio', implying that through the pleasure taken in the representation the effect on the mind will be deeper, producing a greater receptiveness.

The association of pleasure with a greater receptiveness to virtue and truth in the audience recalls the comments of Aquinas on the value of corporeal images for mnemonic purposes. Memory, or more precisely, artificial memory[39], has been classified as a part of prudence, allowing one to recall the paths of virtue and of vice. Dealing with the problem that memory is a part of the imagination, and hence of the sensitive rather than rational soul, he states that 'prudentia applicat universalem cognitionem ad particularia, quorum est sensus; unde multa quae pertinent ad partem sensitivam requiruntur ad prudentiam. Inter quae est memoria.'[40] In this Aquinas displays a willingness to see the senses as working in harmony with the intellect, being used by it for a properly virtuous end. He goes on to discuss the value of corporeal images for the prudential use of memory, recommending that these should not be too familiar:

> quia ea quae sunt inconsueta magis miramur, et sic in eis animus magis et vehementius detinetur [...]. Ideo autem necessaria est huiusmodi similitudinum vel imaginum adinventio, quia intentiones simplices et spirituales facilius ex anima elabuntur nisi quibusdam similitudinibus corporalibus quasi alligentur; quia humana cognitio potentior est circa sensibilia.
>
> (Ibid.)

In a similar connection, Albertus Magnus states that corporeal similitudes are important because 'metaphorica plus movent animam at ideo plus conferunt memoria'[41]. Fabulous images are all the more effective in this respect since 'mirabile plus movet quam consuetum, et ideo cum huius modi imagines translationis sint compositae ex miris plus

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39. For a clear account of the workings of artificial memory see Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Ark, 1984).

40. *ST*, II-II, q.49, art.1.

41. *De Bono*, IV, ii, 2, sol.16 (in *Opera Omnia*, Vol.XXVIII, p.251).

movent quam propria consueta'. Hence, he affirms, the first philosophers conveyed their ideas through poetry, 'quia fabula, cum sit composita ex miris, plus movet.'[42] The sensual power of the figments of the imagination are in this way seen as harmonising with the higher faculties of the soul, the better to help it grasp intelligible truths.

Such an outlook paves the way for the provision of a valid role for imaginative literature, establishing a justification for its figments. Thus, while both Albertus and Aquinas remained inclined to denigrate the value of poetry, distinguishing the use of poetic modes in the Bible from those found in secular texts, many later thinkers were inclined to compare the two, asking how one could call poets liars without impugning the Biblical *auctores*[43]. Looked at along these lines, the fictional framework of a poem, being denied any dominating role in the process of signification, could be seen as useful in terms of its influence on the audience, and it is in these terms that Averroes defines its function. By clothing truth in the corporeal garment of fiction, that truth can be more readily and surely fixed in the human mind. Thus, those aspects of poetry which would seem to focus attention on the text as a verbal construct distinct from any external referent, instead become seen as a way of more effectively impressing truth on the audience. Instead of turning the text inward and away from reality, they are now seen to extend it out into the external world.

The verbal structure of poetry is also assimilated into this framework, as can be seen where the Commentator distinguishes proverbs and fables from poetry:

> Compositorum vero proverbiorum et fabularum opus non est opus poetarum, quamuis huiusmodi proverbia et fabulas adinventicias component sermone metrico. Quamuis enim in metro communicent, tamen alterius eorum completur operatio intenta per fabulas et si sit absque metro.
>
> (p.29)

From this it is clear that the metrical structure of the text, specified as *metrum* in the division of six parts, plays a significant part in the poem's effect, as indicated by the suggestion that were metre not used the poem would not have the same potency, contrary to what is the case with

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42. Ibid., sol.17.

43. For instance, see Boccaccio's comments in *De Genealoge*, XIV, ix (Vol.II pp.707-78).

proverbs and fables. Similarly, Averroes specifies *thonus* as 'maior partium ad impremendum anime et operandum in ipsam.' This suggests that the ornate verbal structure of a poem is considered to be of considerable importance in determining the poem's effect on its audience.

With regard to *thonus*, Judson Boyce Allen sees it as 'the presence of that harmony or sense of rightness which convinces one that one is in the presence of truth', suggesting that it corresponds to the 'medieval sense of being in the presence of musica mundana.' (*Ethical Poetic*, p.37) The comparison with music is certainly apt, since the word *thonus* translates as 'melody'. (I take it to refer in basic terms to those phonetic qualities of language which we would designate by words such as 'assonance' or 'alliteration'.) With regard to *metrum* the connections drawn between metrical and musical proportions and the ordering of reality were noted in the previous chapter. Both these terms thus seem to suggest that the verbal structure of a poem operates in harmony with an ideal *ratio* which governs its significations.

However, it must also be emphasised that the immediate appeal of these terms is to the senses (although this is certainly founded in their basis in a universal order). Thus Robert Henryson, writing of poetic fables, states that 'Thair polite termes of sweit rhetore / Richt plesand ar vnto the eir of man.'[44] Here, the formal structure of poetry is associated with pleasure: the same *delectatio* which Averroes saw in representation. Furthermore, the term 'rhetore' connects the effects of poetic language to those of rhetoric. Discussing rhetorical effect, Alistair Minnis has observed that in the ancient tradition it was felt that 'the orator should win the emotional support of his audience by arousing their feelings', and that this notion was applied in medieval *accessus ad auctores* to pagan poets. Hence, in poetry as well as in rhetoric the pleasure aroused by the harmonious qualities of the language is seen as making the audience tractable, opening their minds to appetitive stimulation, and thus inclining them towards a mood of sensitive appreciation[45]. In this way, the verbal structure of a text is considered to increase its affective power, allowing its meanings to be more readily and effectively impressed on the mind. To appropriate the words of the latin Averroes, 'est maior partium ad impremendum anime et operandum in ipsam.'

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44. *Fables*, 'Prologue', 3-4.
45. *Authorship*, pp.125-26.

What the Averroistic *Poetics* achieves, along with Scholastic literary thought in general, is a thorough reappropriation of imaginative writing for the orthodox view of language. By defining its significative structure as governed by a referent grounded in external truth any sense of it as undermining the certitude of meaning is contained. Those elements of the fictional and formal framework of literary discourse which would seem to separate its meanings from any transcendent reality are given a valid but subordinate instrumental function in their contribution to its affective force. Poetry is thus no longer seen as a distracting influence, removed from the control of an external referent and disrupting a proper understanding of the structure of reality. Instead, its margins become extended upward and outward: upward to the realm of truth and outward to the minds of the audience to whom it renders those truths in an affecting and digestible form. To borrow a convenient distinction from Judson Boyce Allen, rather than being a verbal artefact the text becomes a verbal act, mediating between an external meaning which it signifies and an audience upon whom it impresses that meaning[46]. Where earlier thinkers saw lies there is now truth; where they saw an inflammatory power there is now an affective force for virtue.

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The features of the Scholastic approach to literature which emerge from the foregoing analysis have significant implications for the understanding of the relation between individual literary works from the Middle Ages and the contemporaneous theory, as well as of the literary attitudes expressed in Robert Henryson's works. These implications can be demonstrated through a critique of D.W. Robertson's attempt in *A Preface to Chaucer* to connect the literature and literary theory of the Middle Ages[47]. Robertson's approach is characterised by the assumption that the theory of the day reflects the general attitudes of educated medieval readers and that these attitudes underlie the literary works of writers

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46. The distinction is made in *The Ethical Poetic*, p.87. Allen contrasts a sense of poems as 'verbal constructs' to one of them as 'verbal events which include both reference and rhetorical effect.'

47. D.W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962).

such as Chaucer. Accordingly, he views the interpretative procedures of medieval literary theory as a metalanguage, furnishing modern readers with a system of exegetical protocols which explain the workings of medieval literature and which should govern its interpretation.

Robertson describes medieval art as 'an enigmatical arrangement of visible things which would call attention to an invisible truth', and observes that in the Middle Ages 'a work of art was frequently a problem to be solved' (p.15). As this latter statement in particular suggests, the interpretation of such 'enigmatic' writing involves the discovery of what Robertson later terms 'the abstract truths which its practitioners sought to convey' (p.63). Such truths are viewed as being concealed behind the 'problem' presented by the text, whose apparent complexities may prove misleading to readers not equipped with the correct exegetical key. The proper interpretation of medieval literature is thus seen to consist in moralisation or allegoresis, with the reader transcending the *solas* of the text to identify a clear moral or theological *sentence* which lies behind it.

Robertson argues that the diverse *sentences* of medieval poetry all work together in commonly promoting *caritas* and opposing *cupiditas*. It is assumed that medieval readers are in agreement over what might constitute *caritas* or *cupiditas* in a given situation, and that any matter on which they might care to form an opinion will be morally assessed in the light of these values. Consequently all medieval texts are seen as ultimately harmonising in their meaning[48]. This aspect of Robertson's approach is exemplified in his reading of the Arthurian romances of Chretien de Troyes, which he interprets as presenting a moral condemnation of the folly of sensual love (pp.87-88). Robertson dismisses the fact that the tone of the romances is not condemnatory by invoking the fact that Chretien 'had far more reason to entertain his audience than had an ordinary preacher' (pp.88-89). Rejecting any suggestion that courtly attitudes towards love might differ from those current in the cloister, he observes that 'the standards of reasonable behaviour were, throughout the Middle Ages, those established by the Church' (p,90).

Robertson in fact cites a condemnation of writings such as Chretien's by Odo Tusculanus, which in objecting to romances being more popular than preaching potentially compromises his own position: 'You

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48. See Robertson, pp.24-44, where he aims to demonstrate the mutual consonance of a vast diversity of literary materials.

insult God who, neglecting his words, more readily listen to fables and tirelessly devote yourselves to fictions about Arthur, and Erec, and about Cliges.' (pp.89-90) Odo's stress on the fictional nature of the romances would indicate that, far from viewing them as sententious and edifying, he in fact considers them to be lacking in significance and unworthy of the attention which should be devoted to the truths propounded by preachers. But such evidence, which suggests that there is more room for diversity and disagreement in medieval literature than Robertson is prepared to allow, is dismissed. Robertson attributes Odo's remarks to professional jealousy and an emerging sense of competitiveness between preachers and poets: 'He is disturbed largely because his audience prefers the more entertaining romances to his sermons.' (p.90) For Robertson the moral values espoused by Chretien are no different from those of a medieval preacher, and he considers that for both of them the inculcation of such values is the chief end of literature. From this viewpoint all of a text's idiosyncrasies are non-essential, and all points of disharmony between texts are illusory.

Robertson's approach has met with much dissent on both practical and theoretical grounds. With regard to the former, it has been observed that Robertson's assumptions tend to produce extremely reductive interpretations. His critical method is seriously inadequate when dealing with texts which resist any simple closure, or which seem to adopt a position not clearly amenable to what he considers to be the moral values recommended by the Church. This tendency is exacerbated by Robertson's insistence on the abstract nature of these *sententiae*[49], which encourages him to privilege what is general at the expense of what is distinctive, giving insufficient consideration to the particularising features of the text. Any differentiating features which resist subordination to a general and commonly-held truth are viewed as only apparent difficulties: obstacles to be surmounted in order to determine the universal meaning which they conceal. The consequence of all these features is that the attempt to identify a clear *sententia* often leads to readings which fail to account for large sections of the text and which lay

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49. See Robertson, pp.34-7.

a disproportionate emphasis on the briefest of passages. Indeed, they may even simply replace the apparent sense with an imposed meaning[50].

These inadequacies can be illustated by contrasting Robertson's reading of a passage from the prologue to Chaucer's 'Tale of Melibee' with the implications of the passage itself:

> Therefore, lordynges alle, I yow biseche,
> If that yow thynk I varie as in my speche,
> As thus, though that I telle somwhat moore
> Of proverbes than ye han herd bifoore
> Comprehended in this litel tretys heere,
> To enforce with th'effect of my mateere;
> And though I not the same wordes seye
> As ye han herd, yet to yow alle I preye
> Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,
> Shul ye nowher fynden difference
> Fro the sentence of this tretys lyte
> After the which this murye tale I write.
>
> (*CT*, Frag.VII, ll.953-64, [pp.216-17])

Robertson's reading of this passage, in keeping with the priorities of Scholastic literary theory as outlined above, stresses its privileging of signifier over signified. We are assured that 'The "tretys" referred to is not in fact the source of the "Melibee"'. Rather, 'The "tretys" is obviously *The Canterbury Tales* itself' (p.369). The passage is thus taken to indicate that this tale and all the others agree in their meaning, harmonising in the singularity of Christian truth:

> Chaucer tells us that the *Melibee*, although it differs verbally from the other tales the audience has heard from the 'sondry folk' who proceed towards Canterbury, [...] does not differ from them in *sentence*.
>
> (p.369)

Consequently, in reading *The Canterbury Tales* one should treat any differences or tensions as accidental, tracing the text back to the simple closure of a doctrinally sound *sentence*.

If one tests Robertson's argument against the passage itself, however, it can be seen that the situation is more complicated than he

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50. On Robertson's failure, or refusal, to account for the possibility of dissent or disagreement within medieval literature, see Sheila Delaney, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp.43, 169n. On the general lack of critical sensitivity which Robertson's approach produces, see E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition', in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone, 1970), Ch.10, pp.134-53. See in particular his discussion of Mortimer Donovan's analysis of 'The Nun's Priest's Tale', pp.147-50.

suggests. The most immediate problem is the fact that these lines are Chaucer the pilgrim's explanation to his fellow-travellers of why they may have heard different versions of this particular tale. The passage may have broader implications, but it by no means 'obviously' relates the comments on the 'tretys' primarily to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, and it thus should not be so readily taken as providing general interpretative guidelines. Moreover, considered in their fictional context, the words of the passage are addressed by Chaucer the pilgrim to an audience composed of other pilgrims, with Chaucer the poet reporting this initial address to the audience reading the tales. This makes the nuances of the prologue much more subtle than Robertson suggests, producing a complex interplay between the different narratorial and audience perspectives which are evoked. This is far removed from the simple interpretative prompting which Robertson perceives in the passage. Rather than pointing to a simple and transcendent level of meaning, the prologue to the 'Melibee' in fact foregrounds the significative transformations which a piece of discourse necessarily undergoes as it is articulated in different contexts.

The inadequacies of Robertson's reading of the prologue to the 'Melibee' underlines the general critical problems attached to his method, as his *a priori* assumption that each text closes unproblematically on a simple truth leads him to overlook or dismiss elements which resist such neat resolution. But Robertson's incapacity to perceive the complexities of this passage from Chaucer, in suggesting that there were ways of signifying current in the Middle Ages which he fails to recognise, also highlights a more specific problem with regard to the limitations of his account of medieval literary theory.

The closure which Robertson imposes on texts in subordinating them to an ideal signified seems in accordance with the procedures of Scholastic literary exegesis which I have outlined above (although for reasons which will become clear below, Robertson himself is dismissive of the Scholastic achievement). While the Scholastics have a much higher respect for the affective value of the sensual appeal of poetic discourse than does Robertson[51], both nevertheless tend to reduce the text to the

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51. Robertson recognises the importance attached to the affective value of poetry, but insists that the appeal is to the intellect *rather than* the senses (see Robertson, pp.55-6). The Scholastics of course maintain a sense of the intelligible basis

level of instrumentality and subordinate it to an external and ideal meaning. But if the complex and nuanced nature of Chaucer's work seems to fit ill with both Robertson's assumptions and those which underly the critical procedures of Scholastic exegesis, closer analysis will show that Robertson's account of medieval exegetical procedures is oversimplistic. Robertson underestimates the diversity of the views of signification which were current in the later Middle Ages, particularly in Biblical scholarship. He also fails to recognise that the allegorising and moralising approaches which he outlines, and which are certainly dominant in academic literary exegesis, contain elements which provide the potential for the development of alternative views of literature. If Scholastic approaches to literature tend to anchor the text to an ideal level of meaning, they nevertheless also make possible new models and modes of signification which resist closure, and which are more sensitive to the particularising aspects of texts. The intellectual climate of the later Middle Ages will be seen to provide conditions particularly favourable for such development. As I shall argue below, the development of new ways of signifying occurs in vernacular literature through a modification of Scholastic literary theory. This process involves a relation between text and theory based not on an author's passive assent to the assumptions and procedures of interpretative precedents, but rather on an active engagement with such precedents, attentive to the creative possiblities which they open.

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Robertson's claim that the exegetical approach which he outlines was almost universally predominant in the later Middle Ages has been seriously questioned in recent criticism. Robertson's account of medieval literary theory posits a patristic tradition of exegesis which persists for over a millenium, and which remains the dominant system of attitudes towards literature throughout that period. However, critics such as Alistair Minnis and Gillian R. Evans have drawn attention to the new possibilities opened by the impact of Scholastic thought, notably through its stress on the literal sense in Biblical analysis, and to the positive

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of affective power, but they afford an irreducible value to a sensual response which operates in conjunction with intellection, and indeed facilitates it.

impact of such developments in extending the scope of late-medieval theory[52].

Robertson's own observations on literalistic Biblical exegesis and on Scholasticism are dismissive:

> The possibility that Chaucer or any other prominent poet of the fourteenth century could take a literal view of the Bible is, historically speaking, extremely unlikely. It may be true that allegory did not flourish in scholastic debate, but nothing of any literary importance flourished there either.
>
> (pp.314-15)

Robertson's view of a separate and vital patristic exegetical tradition co-existing with a stale and unfruitful Scholasticism has been thoroughly controverted. Minnis' work in particular demonstrates the vast influence of Scholasticism and its importance for renovating attitudes towards literature. Indeed, my own analysis in the previous chapter suggests that the Augustinian aesthetic which Robertson outlines actually tends to foster an attitude of suspicion towards literature: it is only with the advent of Scholasticism, with its emphasis on Aristotelian psychology and its renovation of the *ars memorativa*, that a really effective justification for the figments of poetry is provided.

But Robertson's dismissal of Scholasticism is puzzling. The Scholastics introduce to medieval thought on literature the idea that the conjunction of edifying truths with the concrete details of a text is not merely a pleasing adjunct to learning, but is essential to the very process of intellection. This emphasis on the affective and mnemonic value of poetry is largely responsible for the revitalisation and extension of the exegetical traditions of literary moralisation and allegoresis[53]. Since the general influence of such traditions is at the very core of Robertson's argument, the enervating effect of Scholasticism would seem to strengthen his case for arguing such influence.

Nevertheless, Robertson's minimising of the importance of Scholasticism is understandable in the light of its broader implications. Recognition of the significance and influence of the Scholastic achievement in the field of secular literature demands that one also recognise the importance of the developments evident in Scholastic

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52. See Minnis, *Authorship*, *passim*, and Gillian R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.42-50.

53. See Minnis & Scott, pp.321-34, and above, pp.58-60.

Biblical scholarship. These developments are far less amenable to Robertson's argument. They inaugurate analytical procedures and interpretative assumptions which undermine his claim as to the universality of the interpretative procedures which he propounds, and which call into question the justification for his reductively abstractive interpretations.

With the advent of the view of theology as an affective science and the development of the Aristotelian four causes as an analytical schema late-medieval exegetes began to afford much greater privilege to the literal sense of the Bible than did their predecessors. This allowed considerable attention to be given to the creativity of the Biblical *auctores*, so that rather than viewing them as being merely the pen of the Holy Spirit exegetes could concentrate much more closely on the distinctive literary styles and modes which the *auctores* employed[54]. In this respect the study of the Bible and the study of poetry come together within a common set of analytical procedures: the attention to *sententia* in Biblical study is extended to poetry while the attention to form and style found in poetic exegesis is employed by the theologians[55]. This awareness of human creativity sits uneasily with Robertson's analytical emphasis on transcendent meaning, which in making *a priori* abstract truths the main focus of critical attention, minimises the importance which is attached to those elements of a text which are the product of human ingenuity.

If the focus on the literary methods of the human *auctores* of scripture brings the study of the Bible closer to the study of secular literature, in other respects the transformations in Biblical scholarship produce a view of signification which differs from that assumed in the study of poetry. The value of allegoresis, a technique which was being increasingly employed in the interpretation of poetry, is called into question by many late-medieval Biblical exegetes. Figures such as St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure, for instance, stressed that it was necessary that the allegorical meanings which one finds concealed behind a scriptural passage should be openly expressed elsewhere in the Bible[56].

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54. See Minnis, *Authorship*, pp.75-8.
55. See *Authorship*, pp.141-42.
56. See Aquinas, *ST*, I, i, 10, ad.1; St Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, Prologue, vi (Minnis & Scott, pp.236-8).

This precept is also to be found in the work of St Augustine[57], but the strong emphasis which it came to receive in the later Middle Ages is distinctive. This emphasis is underscored when one considers that in the later Middle Ages the precept is being stated in a context where earlier allegorical exegesis is increasingly coming to be perceived as excessive[58], a fact which gives the injunction a much more pointed and corrective quality than it has in Augustine, symptomatic of the new accent being placed upon it. Such a position on exegesis still leaves considerable room for interpretative freedom in allegoresis, indicated by the fact that Aquinas states the precept in a passage where he also reaffirms the principle of multiple levels of Biblical significance (*ST*, I, q.1, art.10, resp.). But the emphasis which it introduces nevertheless effectively reduces the allegorical levels of meaning to an optional extra, placing priority firmly on the literal sense as the fundamental arbiter of Biblical truth[59].

Other late-medieval exegetes adopted positions which conjoined an emphasis on the literal sense with criticism of the interpretative freedom in allegoresis which both Aquinas and Bonavenure retain. These exegetes argued that the parameters of legitimate reading ought to be more restricted and that interpretation ought to respect the obvious sense of the letter. Nicholas of Lyre (d.1340), for instance, in attacking the allegorical excesses of some interpreters, observes that just as a house which becomes separated from its foundation will collapse, so allegorical interpretations should not depart too much from the solid base of the literal sense[60]. An earlier but more extreme advocate of this position is William of Auvergne (d.1249), who argues in his *De Legibus* that meanings adduced allegorically, such as the twelfth century exegesis of the David and Bathsheba narrative, are not significations but similitudes: ie., they are not part of the intentional structure of the text, but are comparisons imposed on it by the exegete.

William draws a contrast between the ways in which allegorising exegetes correlate diverse things and the way in which this is done in, for instance, the book of *Jeremiah*:

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57. *Epistola* XCIII, *PL*, 33, 321-47, viii, 24 (cols 333-34).
58. See Minnis, *Authorship*, pp.106-7.
59. See Minnis & Scott, p.204.
60. Nicholas of Lyre, *Littera Postilla,* 'Second Prologue', translated and excerpted in Minnis & Scott, pp.268-70 (p.268).

> Quomodo si mulier contemnat amatorem suum, sic contempsit me domus Israel. [*Jer*.iii, 20] Non dixit, quia contemptus huius mulieris significaret contemptum filiiorum Israel, nec dixit quod amator huius singificaret ipsum, [...] sed expressit modum seu similitudinem notam inter opus figuli et opus suum, et inter factum mulieris contemnetis amatorem suum et factum populi Israel, quo modo si loquerentur sacro expositores et doctores in allegoriis et tropologiis suis etiam anagogicis interpretationibus, et scripturae satisfacterunt et audientium sive legentium intellectus non offenderunt. Sed quia dicitur: 'tale quid significat tale quid, et est figura seu prophetia aut parabola talis rei,' cum alterum propter alterum significandum nec factum nec dictum videatur, offendunt graviter audientes.[61]

In William's view, then, while allegorical interpretation can retain a pedagogic value, it is to be dismissed as a tool for scholarly analysis of the real meaning of a text[62]. William's position is an extreme one, but it participates in the shift in attitudes which underlies the pronouncements of figures such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Nicholas of Lyre, all of whom diminish in their differing ways the importance of the allegorical levels of the Biblical text in favour of the literal sense.

This shift in attitudes conjoins with the emphasis on the style and creativity of the Biblical *auctores* to produce a strong awareness of how texts have been intended by their authors to convey a particular meaning, making the discovery of this intention the main aim of exegesis[63]. These facts make nonsense of Robertson's affirmation that it is 'extremely unlikely' that a fourteenth century poet might have viewed the Bible literally, and seriously undermine his insistence that it is an understanding of the relation of a text's meaning to abstract truth which is prioritised in medieval thought. Rather, they indicate that the understanding of that meaning in relation to the specific interests and motivations of the author might also be a legitimate exegetical goal.

Another line of development in late-medieval theory calls into question Robertson's view that a medieval text's meaning properly understood will take the form of an abstract truth. The new emphasis on the affective nature of scripture introduces a conviction that the Bible, since it does not only convey information about theological or moral

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61. William of Auvergne, *De Legibus*, excerpted in Beryl *Studies in Medieval Literature and Learning: From Abelard to Wyclif* (London: Hambledon, 1981), pp.179-81 (pp.179-80).

62. See Smalley, *Studies*, pp.150-51; Evans, *Language and Logic*, p.44.

63. See Minnis & Scott, pp.203-9.

wisdom but also inspires its readers with a desire to embrace such wisdom, can not merely be concerned with communicating abstract truths but must also provide a means of mediating between such simple truths and the diverse circumstances in which they are received by a fallen humanity. This conviction leads to a view of signification which is sensitive to the ways in which texts tend to depart from such a simple level of meaning, giving ample consideration to what is particular in their significance as well as to what is universal.

This viewpoint is expressed in Alexander of Hales' argument that scripture adopts diverse *modi* in order to address the different *conditiones* of humanity (see above, p.40). Alexander's argument suggests that attention must be given not merely to ideal truths and values *per se*, but also to their necessary diffraction as they are applied in varying circumstances[64]. This approach is similar to that recommended by Abelard, whose work strikingly anticipates later developments in medieval theory:

> Diligenter et illud discutiendum est, cum de eodem diversa dicuntur, quid ad praecepti coarctationem, quid ad indulgentiae remissionem vel ad perfectionis exhortationem intendatur, ut secundum intentionum diversitatem adversitatis quaeramus remedium.
>
> (*Sic et Non*, Prol., col.1341)

Consequently, understanding a passage of scripture, for both Alexander and Abelard, consists not only in perceiving an ideal level of meaning but also in the comprehension of how that meaning has been given a distinctive configuration according to the circumstances which the author is addressing. As with the developing emphasis on the importance of the literal sense and of stylistic features, this facilitates a considerable sensitivity to diversity and distinctiveness in discussion of the sacred page, and involves a view of signification very different from that assumed by Robertson.

The developments in late-medieval Biblical exegesis outlined above by no means rule out the possibility that many late-medieval readers and writers might hold the attitudes and priorities which Robertson ascribes to them. If one qualifies Robertson's position by making it clear that a sensitivity to the individuating features of Biblical texts was widespread

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64. For an opposition to Alexander's view which clearly brings out these features of it, see the discussion of Henry of Ghent's attitudes, below, pp.74-5.

in the later Middle Ages, one can still see how that sensitivity might be reabsorbed within a perspective which maintains his view of medieval art as 'a problem to be solved', closing on a transcendent and commonly held truth[65]. Thus, an awareness of the distinctive stylistic features of a work might be accompanied by a view that such features simply serve to clothe a prior meaning, so that while style becomes fundamental to the affective transmission of meaning, it remains non-essential to that meaning's constitution. Indeed, the analysis earlier in this chapter of Scholastic attitudes towards literature, where an awareness of the importance of stylistic features is not permitted to compromise the ideality of meaning, suggests that universalising exegetical priorities almost totally retain their dominance in that sphere of study. Equally, the desire to produce a consonance between meaning and the literal sense can be satisfied through exemplificatory moralisation[66]. Such tropological exegesis certainly involves a much greater contiguity between a text's ideal meaning and its concrete details. But it could still tend to privilege the former, concentrating as in the Averroistic *Poetics* on the need to raise the particular to the level of the universal, and thus tending to prioritise the closure of meaning on an abstract truth.

But, judging from the developments occuring in late-medieval exegesis, it is equally possible that medieval readers and writers might approach a text in a way which balances a focus on universal meaning with a close attention to individuating features, examining the distinctive motivations which led an *auctor* to convey a particular meaning in a particular manner. Alternatively, the example of Alexander of Hales might be followed, so that instead of tracing the text to the simplicity of an ideal *sententia*, attention is devoted to understanding how meaning has been shaped in order to address a specific context. Late-medieval Biblical exegesis in fact facilitates a broad range of possible interpretative emphases and priorities, and certainly provides the foundations for modes of textual analysis which devote considerable attention to all of a text's individuating qualities. No one of the many approaches which occur within this range can lay claim to be the definitive one. Rather, criticism must operate with a flexible awareness of the diverse ways in

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65. On the persistence of such priorities in late-medieval exegesis, see Evans, *Language and Logic*, pp.46-8.

66. See Minnis & Scott, p.208.

which medieval literary theory may be employed. Robertson's normative pronouncements may thus be objected to without wholly rejecting his emphasis on the value of an awareness of medieval literary theory for modern readers of medieval literature: his interpretative procedures were already being questioned in the later Middle Ages.

Turning from Biblical to literary exegesis, it must be noted that while Scholastic attitudes to literary texts evince many of the characteristics which Robertson sees as typical of all medieval exegesis, they also contain elements, neglected by Robertson, which bear a relation to the more radical developments in Biblical exegesis. These elements provide a transformative potential which opens the possibility of greater sensitivity to a text's particularising features and of greater resistance to the closure of meaning on a transcendent signified. As I shall demonstrate, this potential is in fact inscribed within the very procedures which work to guarantee a sense of the text's ideal reference and to reduce the signifer to the level of instrumentality. An awareness of such aspects of Scholastic literary theory is of vital importance when considering the relation between the discourse of academic Scholasticism and individual literary texts. That relation need not be merely one of the latter's passive assent to the conventions established by the former. It may be one of creative modification, whereby possibilities implicit within the academic framework can produce models and modes of signification very different from those from which they are developed.

8

One of the main emphases of Scholastic literary theory, central to its argument for the essential moral value of imaginative writing, is the affective function of literature. Through the emotive and mnemonic value of their sensual appeal literary texts are seen as facilitating an individual's grasp of universal values. Consequently, Scholastic literary theory involves not only the emphasis on the ideal *sententia* of a text implied in Robertson's account of medieval interpretative procedures, but also a strong awareness of the needs of the audience to whom that *sententia* is communicated. It is this sensitivity to audience, and the elements of Scholastic literary theory which cater to it, which provide a key potential for transformation.

As was noted above (pp.55), the heuristic nature of allegoresis, in presenting a text as having a range of meanings from which different readers may select according to their own requirements, provides a means of taking diverse audience requirements into account in accordance with the affective emphasis of Scholastic literary theory. Indeed, this is expressly stated by Henry of Ghent with regard to Biblical allegoresis when, objecting to the argument that the diverse *conditiones* of humanity requires diverse *modi* in the Bible, he observes in his *Summa Quaestiones Ordinarii* that this diversity in the audience is already accounted for in the multiple levels of meaning:

> The appropriate mode for this science (theology) is not that all the individual things relating to it should be treated separately, and receive different treatment as is best suited to various people, and in so far as [the teachers] can impart information in different ways about different aspects of Christian belief. But the mode used ought to be such that disparate teachings (*sententiae*) concerning different subjects and different tenets of belief should be contained in one and the same discourse (*sermo*), and that these should be tailored to suit various conditions of men, so that the man who cannot assimilate more may be content with the surface literal interpretation, but the man who can may seek the spiritual understanding underneath the literal one, depending on the progress he has made.[67]

It must be noted here that Henry's argument is pointedly directed against the suggestion, implicit in the opinions expressed by Alexander of Hales', that audience diversity requires singular meaning to be diffracted into many partial forms. The audience-orientated aspect of his view of allegory is balanced by a desire to preserve a sense of the ideality of meaning. Thus he observes that, 'since this [science] is offered for consideration in its totality everywhere to every condition of men, one should in no way claim that there should be a different mode of imparting that knowledge because of the different conditions of men, so that often a science that is one whole should be dealt with in different ways, which is absurd.' (*SQ*, art.14, q.1, pnt 6, Minnis & Scott, p.253)

Consequently, Henry considers that different audiences are catered to, not by having the same truth represented from diverse perspectives, but rather by having different levels of the text refer to different teachings and tenets of the faith. Any one of these necessarily remains a

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67. Henry of Ghent, *Summa Quaestiones*, xiv, i, vii. Excerpted and translated in Minnis & Scott, pp.250-66 (pp.253-4).

partial selection from the total body of truth which underlies any Biblical text, but each will be perceived by all readers in the same simple form. Thus, Henry provides the flexibility necessary for the Biblical text to address people of diverse *conditiones*, while still maintaining the clarity of ideal reference. In upholding both these priorities, his allegoresis conforms to the practice of Scholastic literary exegetes.

But while this aspect of allegoresis ultimately tends to maintain a sense of the ideality of meaning, it also involves an awareness that a given reading highlights only one from a number of possible significations. This introduces a self-ironising element to the adduced meaning, effectively placing it under erasure. Any one *sententia* appears as a partial selection from the totality of meaning which governs the text and is prioritised only according to the demands of particular circumstances, making no claim to be the final word. Meaning is thus posited with an awareness of its limitations with regard to the total body of meaning from which it derives. Like the divine Word in Augustine's thought, the rich significative framework within which a text resonates provides a validating point of origin which authorises a given interpretation. But it equally provides a contrast between its own comprehensive nature and humanity's partial representations of it. Allegoresis thus operates with both a sense of connection to the divine Word which vouchsafes certitude, and a sense of distance from it which cautions humility[68].

In this latter aspect of allegoresis, where the unity of the Word is diffracted so as to address diverse circumstances, an awareness of the relative and partial nature of meaning is introduced which associates it with the constraints and limitations of human vision. The potential is thus provided for a view of signification attentive to those features of texts which signal their meanings' distance from the divine Word. The way is opened for a mode of exegesis which can counter the abstractive, universalising tendencies of Scholastic literary theory, viewing meaning as constructed under the influence of contingent factors rather than as simply given in the nature of things.

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68. On this dual aspect of allegory, see J. Hillis Miller, 'The Two Allegories', in Morton W. Bloomfield (ed.), *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp.355-70.

This aspect of allegoresis, however, is not generally developed by Scholastic exegetes in such a way as to destabilise meaning, or in any way compromise its identification with a simple and externally-grounded truth. Certainly, any specific interpretation, being a partial exposition of the fullness of a text's overall *intentio*, is clearly seen as limited and as only ever claiming to offer a relatively adequate reading. But this perspective tends to be balanced by and subordinated within a validating emphasis on the certitude which obtains from the positive connection between the interpretation and the comprehensive framework of meaning from which it derives.

This can be illustrated from a passage from Saint Augustine's *Confessiones* which vilifies those who argue over the proper interpretation of sacred Scripture:

> Cum vero dicit: Non hoc ille [Moses] sensit quod tu dicis, sed quo dico; neque tamen negat, quod uterque nostrum dicit, utrumque verum esse: O vita pauperum Deus meus, in cujus sinu non est contradictio, plue mihi mitigationes in cor, ut patentier tales feram qui non mihi hoc dicunt, quia divini sunt, et in corde famuli tui viderunt quod dicunt; sed quia superbi sunt: nec noverunt Moysi sententiam, sed amant suam; non qua vera est, sed quia sua est.
> (*Conf.* XII, 25, col.839)

The self-ironising spirit in which a reading should be proposed is expressed by Augustine as a humility which prevents one from affirming one's own preferred reading as definitive and which instead leads to a consideration of it as one among a number of possible valid interpretations. But Augustine reincorporates this sense of the limitations of a given reading within a general affirmation of the positive value of all meanings which conform to the truths of Christian faith, as revealed and guaranteed by God, 'in cujus sinu non est contradictio':

> Alioquin et aliam veram pariter amarent, sicut ego amo quod dicunt; non quia ipsorum est, sed quia verum est [...].
> (Ibid., cols 839-40)

If, in the face of diversity of opinion, Augustine emphasises the limitations of each interpetation compared to the comprehensiveness of the Word, he does so only to emphasise the mutual authority which derives from their common place within the truth. Indeed, he makes it clear that, in his view, to focus on such differences of opinion as being matters of note is to stir up unnecessary discord. Ultimately, the circumstances which cause one reader to prefer one truth, and another to

prefer a different one, are dismissed from consideration in favour of an affirmation of all true interpretation's transcendence of local happenstance:

> et ideo jam nec ipsorum est, quia verum est. [...] Ideoque Domine, tremenda sunt judicia tua; quoniam veritas tua nec mea est, nec illius aut illius, sed omniom nostram [...].
>
> (Ibid., col.840)

The particularising and potentially destabilising aspects of this mode of exegesis thus tend not to be drawn out in a way which actively invites one to approach a given reading critically with attention to the circumstances in which it has been produced. Rather, those aspects encourage one to broaden the assent which one gives to any one *sententia* so as to equally encompass other alternatives.

This strategy is also evident in the fourteenth century, in Pierre Bersuire's prologue to his *Ovidus Moralizatus*. Bersuire observes that when he had nearly completed his work he was given a copy of the French *Ovide Moralisé* in which he found interpretations which had not occurred to him. But far from allowing this to lead him to a sense of the inadequacies of his own readings, Bersuire simply extends his sense of their positive value to include tolerance of multiple interpretations:

> I found there many good expositions, both allegorical and moral. So having looked through my own [interpretations] again, if I had not already put forward these new interpretations I assigned them to their correct place.
>
> (Minnis & Scott, p.368)

In showing such toleration, Bersuire continues the interpretative spirit recommended in the *Confessiones*. He too proffers his readings while simultaneously refusing to afford them any definitive value, always remaining aware of alternative possibilities. But, as with Augustine, Bersuire does not employ this strategy in a manner which accentuates the particular motivations and contexts which have shaped meaning. There is no sense that either his own expositions or those which he finds in the *Ovide Moralisé* have their general validity restricted by the different circumstances in which they were begotten. The awareness of the limitations of meaning which permits the tolerance of various readings is reincorporated within a structure which affirms the universal value that different *sententiae* equally derive from their participation in the unified body of Christian truth. In this, Augustine and Bersuire

remain in step with the interpretative aims of Henry of Ghent and of Scholastic literary theory in general. The exegetical mode which they adopt is designed to contain any particularising elements which compromise the ideal authority of meaning.

Despite this rather conservative tendency among most exegetes, the potential for the development of alternative models of signification remains inscribed within their interpretative procedure. This potential is exploited in a number of literary works from the fourteenth century on. Dante's *Commedia* provides one such instance. Jesse M. Gellrich has written on the way in which Dante's poem has frequently been interpreted as embodying the medieval idea of the book of the world, a view embodied in Singleton's argument that the correct response to the *Commedia* is to treat it as myth, giving oneself over to its fictional world as though it were reality. The poem is, from this viewpoint, to be taken as making present the transcendent metaphysical order through the entirety of which Dante's journey leads him[69].

Gellrich points out that while many elements of the poem do indeed tend in such a direction, there are nevertheless many other elements which stress the inadequacy of Dante's power to fulfil such a project in the face of the ineffable order which he aims to describe (pp.143-57). The image of the divine book which Dante sees in the light of the divine essence in the final canto of the *Paradiso* encapsulates this aspect of the poem[70]:

> I saw gathered there in the depths of it,
> Bound up by love into a single volume,
> All the leaves scattered through the universe.
> (*Par.*, Canto XXXIII, ll.85-7)

The book in its ideal form constitutes a unity in which diverse parts are comprehended within a single whole. Yet this unity appears only in the light of the divine essence, and is only experienced by those separated from that essence as scattered pages, whose full meaning within the order of the book never becomes evident. Dante's own actual book is thus depicted as connected to this ideal book, participating in the

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69. Gellrich, pp.140-41. Charles Singleton, 'Dante's Allegory', in R.J. Clements (ed.), *American Critical Essays on the* Divine Comedy (New York and London: New York University Press, 1967), pp.91-103.

70. See Gellrich, p.157.

comprehensive unity of its meaning, while at the same time being distanced from it, only offering a partial glimpse of that unity.

This stress on the limitations and necessary incompleteness of the *Commedia* in relation to its subject occurs in other aspects of the poem. Dante frequently draws attention to the inadequacies of his own memory, emphasising the fact that what we are reading is a reconstruction of his visionary experience, existing at a distance from the things which he saw[71]. The representations presented in the poem are also shown to be constrained by the inadequacies of language and by the rules of art:

> If, reader, I had room to write more,
> My poem could still not tell you everything
> About the sweet drink of which I could never have had enough.
>
> But since all the pages designed for this
> Second part of the poem have been filled,
> The rules of art stop me at this point.
> (*Purg*. Canto XXXIII, ll.136-141)

Equally, and particularly in the *Paradiso*, Dante highlights his intellect's incapacity to grasp in their pure form the wonders with which he is confronted, and emphasises that what he sees is presented to him as an indirect representation of a higher reality. Thus in *Paradiso* IV, Beatrice explains that the souls which Dante encounters on the lowest of the celestial spheres do not really occupy that place:

> They show themselves here, not because this sphere
> Is so assigned to them, but to indicate
> What is the lowest of the celestial states.
>
> There must be such language for your mind
> Because it learns from what is sensible
> Matter which, afterwards, it makes fit for the intellect.
> (ll.37-42)

The *Commedia* thus presents not a mirror of the book of the world, but an indirect reconstruction of it, where it is altered by the limitations of Dante's memory at the time of writing, by his mind's incapacity to grasp what he experienced, by the impossibility of conveying his experience in language, and by the necessity of selecting from and reordering those experiences in accordance with artistic principles. Far from encapsulating the book of the world (the concept of which nevertheless remains present as an ideal against which Dante's work

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71. See ibid., pp.146-47.

must be weighed), the *Commedia* is presented as a flawed and indirect depiction of things which are often themselves a flawed and indirect image of an ultimate reality which remains ineffable.

It might be argued that these aspects of the *Commedia* can be understood as a consequence of the poem's polysemous allegorical nature. The poem's polysemy has traditionally been understood in two ways. It has been seen by some critics as the allegory of the poets, where the literal sense of the fictional text is a beautiful lie which conceals true meanings established independent of its fictive signings. Others have identified the *Commedia* as employing the allegory of the theologians, where the literal sense signifies things which are themselves true, but which in turn signify other things. Both accounts of the *Commedia*'s *modus significandi* involve a sense of the limitations of meaning. Any given level of the poem's significance provides only a partial mode of understanding, open to qualification by significances established on other levels of its polysemous structure[72]. An awareness of the poem's multi-layered nature is certainly vital to its understanding. The perspective provided when one sees it in terms of the allegory of the theologians is particularly important. In allowing Beatrice, for instance, to be understood both as a real person and a representation of theology, it provides a conjuncture of concrete and abstractive viewpoints, while distinguishing them in a manner which signals that neither is wholly adequate in itself. In this, as will be discussed in more detail shortly, the *Commedia*'s polysemy contributes to the poem's ethical accent which demands that a positive relation be established beween ideal values and human life.

However, to understand the *Commedia*'s destabilisations of meaning merely in terms of its polysemy, regardless of whether one views it as poetic or theological allegory, is to overlook significant aspects of the poem. Ultimately, such a perspective reduces the poem's significative mode to one of reference. The allegory of the poets constructs the text's

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72. On the distinction between the allegory of the theologians and the allegory of the poets, see Ch.1 of Dante's exposition of his *Convivio*, trans. Minnis & Scott, pp.396-98; *Epistle to Can Grande delle Stelle*, excerpted and translated in Minnis & Scott, pp.458-69 (pp.459-60). On the debate over which of these modes of allegory is applicable to the *Commedia*, see Richard Hamilton Green, 'Dante's "Allegory of the Poets" and the Medieval Theory of Poetic Fiction', *Comparative Literature*, 9 (1957), 118-28, and Charles S. Singleton, 'The Irreducible Dove', ibid., 129-35.

fictional aspects as devoid of any real significance, subordinating them to meanings which are wholly exterior to the poem's textuality. The allegory of the theologians rescues the fictional letter simply by denying that it is to be understood as fiction, viewing it as directly signifying things which are in themselves true. The co-existence of different levels of meaning may accentuate the limitations of any one of these relative to the totality of the poem's comprehensive significance. But the critics' descriptions of the *Commedia*'s polysemy have consistently minimised or excluded any suggestion that its significations are to be taken as having an indirect relation to reality. This ultimately assimilates the poem's structure to the traditional pattern established in Scholastic allegoresis. Both assume a model of signification in which those aspects that suggest the interpretative nature of meaning and indicate its oblique relation to prior truths, are contained within a structure which reaffirms its referential authority.

The *Commedia*'s mode of signification, however, differs from the traditional pattern of Scholastic allegoresis in a manner which critical accounts of its polysemous structure have overlooked. Dante's foregrounding of the ways in which his work departs from what it aims to describe stresses that the meaning of the *Commedia* is produced not through reference, nor even imitation, but through *interpretation*. Rather than adopting the traditional medieval role of the self-effacing author, Dante emphasises that his poem has been actively constructed through human agency, and that it consequently provides an image of the divine *ordo* as seen from a perspective within that same *ordo*. These aspects of the *Commedia* are most highly accentuated in *Paradiso*. But they are present throughout the poem in its discussions of issues such as memory and artifice, the implications of which merely become particularly intensified in the celestial spheres. Dante employs these features to stress the distance between signified and referent, laying emphasis on the ways in which his poem's meaning has been shaped by a textual processing of reality, rather than determined through reference. The *Commedia* invites one to qualify assent to its signings with a critical detachment regarding them which remains aware that their truth value is compromised by their status as partial constructs[73].

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73. For views of the *Commedia* which examine the ways in which the poem's own textuality becomes part of its subject matter, see John Freccero, 'Infernal Irony: The

If Dante's work in this way differs significantly from the attitudes of Scholastic literary exegesis, it is nevertheless important to note that a continuity also exists between them. In signalling the provisionality of the *Commedia* by stressing its interpretative, textual characteristics, Dante introduces a self-erasing element strikingly similar to that found in allegoresis, simultaneously positing meaning and calling it into question. The *Commedia* certainly develops this to an unprecedented extent. In foregrounding human creativity and its influence in constructing meaning, Dante accentuates the particularising features of literature which the Scholastics sought to dispense with. But for all the differences between them, Dante's innovations are produced through a modification of Scholastic literary theory which exploits a transformative potential which is inscribed therein.

Dante's indebtedness to the Scholastics is also indicated by the fact that, as in Scholastic allegoresis, these aspects of the *Commedia* which destabilise meaning are tied to a strong ethical emphasis which constantly refers universal and unchanging truths of the poem back to the temporal vicissitudes of particular circumstances. This ethical dimension appears throughout the *Commedia*. In *Purgatorio* XXXII, having reached the heights of the earthly paradise and being on the point of entering the celestial paradise, Dante is presented with an allegorical vision which depicts the history of the Church on earth, covering such matters as the Donation of Constantine, outbreaks of heresy, the rise of Islam, and the relation between the Church and the secular state in the fourteenth century (ll.109-60). In *Paradiso* XXI and XXII, in the sphere of the contemplatives, St Peter Damian and St Benedict complain of the very earthly matters of the decline and corruption of the monastic orders (Cantos XXI, ll.130-5, XXII, ll.73-96). In *Paradiso* XXX, as Dante draws nearer to his moment of beatific vision, Beatrice parts from him with a prophecy in which she praises Emperor Henry VII and condemns Pope Clement V (ll.136-48). Such satirical and political elements of the poem operate in tandem with the general device which operates throughout the poem whereby Dante repeatedly encounters souls who proceed to recount events from their temporal life which function as examples of vices to be

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Gates of Hell', in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.93-109. See also Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the* Comedy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

avoided and virtues to be embraced. The poem thus consistently underscores Dante's refusal to allow his readers to rest with the spiritual realities which he describes, insisting instead on constantly referring their attention back to a consideration of the facts of secular existence and of their own lives.

This ethical imperative in the *Commedia* is wholly in keeping with the requirements of Scholastic literary theory. Moreover, a vital point in this connection is the relation between the poem's ethical emphasis and its foregrounding of its own textuality. The *Commedia* is presented as only one interpretation of the universal order, orientated towards a selective depiction of secular realities, which is determined by the constraints of Dante's particular situation. But Dante's perspective may not be appropriate for others. The *Comeddia* thus highlights its own provisional status, signalling that other valid representations are possible, and indeed, necessary. Dante's priority is not to present ideal truths *per simplice*. Rather he introduces a powerful emphasis on the specific contexts from which such values are approached, and makes the awareness of how a text's meaning is shaped within such contexts an essential object of interpretative concern if one is to arrive at a properly ethically-orientated reading. The *Commedia* accordingly aims to direct the audience away from a consideration of the poem in itself, instead alerting them to the need to arrive at an understanding appropriate to their own circumstances.

The relation between Dante's *Commedia* and Scholastic literary theory thus appears as one of both difference and indebtedness. In introducing emphases on the limitations of meaning, on the role of poetic creativity in constructing it, and on the importance of an understanding of the context within which it has been produced, Dante's literary attitudes clearly differ markedly from those of the European schoolmen. But these innovations are introduced in the interests of an ethical emphasis which he inherits from those same schoolmen, and they are produced through a radical development of possibilities which are already inscribed within the theoretical assumptions and interpretative practices of such exegetes. Dante's *Commedia*, for all its originality and innovativeness, constitutes not a break from the attitudes current in academic Scholasticism, but rather a radical development which is born of those same attitudes.

The example of Dante provides a clear warning against the Robertsonian view of the relation between medieval texts and medieval literary theory. Far from involving a passive assimilation of and assent to the interpretative procedures and attitudes of Scholasticism, The *Commedia* shows that literary texts can engage with Scholastic literary theory critically, adopting many of its strategies and priorities while at the same time creatively transforming them. Such flexible literary deployment of its resources means that medieval literary theory cannot be used as a metalanguage, authorising a single interpretative approach to all medieval texts. Rather the engagement of literature with Scholastic literary exegesis can evolve models of signification which differ radically from the valorisation of universal meaning which Robertson insists upon, permitting, as is the case with Dante, considerable sensitivity towards what is particular and distinctive in a text. General pronouncements such as Robertson's can only blind one to a diversity in medieval writing which defies such oversimplification.

Dante's example also illustrate a key direction in which attitudes towards literature were being developed by late-medieval writers. If viewed in the context of developments in other theoretical areas, the literary strategies of the *Commedia* can be seen not merely as an idiosyncrasy on Dante's part, but as a response to certain deepening tensions occuring throughout medieval Scholastic philosophy which put considerable strain on the assumptions and strategies of literary exegesis. These tensions appear most vividly, and in a way most pertinent to Scholastic literary theory, in late-medieval thought on the nature of universals.

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In Platonic thought, universals were viewed as real and separate forms, in which individual beings participated and from which they derived their nature. In Aristotelian philosophy, they were seen not as existing outside individuals, but as a common nature located in those individuals. Both philosophies in their different ways insist on universals as something real. Any given existent is what it is through the action of form on matter. While individuated by matter, its form nevertheless operates as a *telos*, orientating the existing thing towards the most

perfect realisation of that form. In so far as that realisation is imperfect, the existent has failed to realise its nature. Consequently, a proper understanding of reality must depend on an understanding of that which is universal in it. In both ontological and (when dealing with rational beings) ethical terms, particular realities move towards the realisation of an ideal form, and they are to be understood in terms of the degree to which their assimilation within that ideal has been achieved.

This attitude is inscribed within the Averroistic *Poetics*, in a discussion of 'indirection' (*circulatio*) deeply relevant to medieval theories of comedy:

> Omnis enim representatio aut imperat sibi locum per representationem sui contrarii et post permutatut ad suam intentionem. Et est modus qui dicitur apud eos circulatio. Aut rem impsam non mentionem aliquam sui contrarii. Et hoc est quod ipset nominabant significationem.
>
> (pp.20-21)

Consequently, if tragedy directly depicts a set of ideal values and aims to produce an assimilation between those values and the audience, raising the particular to the level of the universal, comedy, being the art of blame, achieves the same end by different means. It is viewed as directing the audience towards the ideal in a roundabout manner, presenting vices in order to inculcate a loathing of them and concomitantly leading the audience to embrace the contrary virtues. In both cases, the specific details of the text and the distinctive features of the mode employed are subordinated to a prior set of universal values in relation to which their significance and function are defined. Such a viewpoint is fundamentally realist in its privileging of the universal. It embodies a faith in the possibility of aligning particular reality within the bounds of universal norms, this faith being underpinned by the conviction that to do so is not to neglect or retreat from important aspects of the realities of existence, but to depict that which is most real in it[74].

In his *History of Christian Philosophy*, Etienne Gilson outlines a series of developments which constitute a dramatic rethinking of the relation between universals and particulars[75]. These developments reflect an increasing dissatisfaction with the realist privileging of the

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74. On this privileging of the universal over the particular in Aristotle's thought, see Gilson *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), p.59.

75. Gilson, *History*, pp.471-520.

universal, and a sense that individual existents cannot and should not be neatly comprehended within universal categories but should instead be understood in such a way as to give the fullest respect to their particularities, treating the differentiating features of a thing as in themselves being fundamental and irreducible properties of its reality. This impetus towards an attention to the particular is already evident in the thought of philosphers who are undeniably realist. Aquinas' ethical writings, for instance, while maintaining a sense of the governing priority of absolute moral values as the essential foundation of moral judgement, nevertheless minimises any reductivism into which such a view might lead by also discussing in considerable detail the diverse and indirect ways in which such norms pertain to actual temporal circumstance. Aquinas thus maintains a sense of the universal resonance of particular things being the most vital aspect of their reality, and the key consideration for a proper understanding of them, while at the same time aiming to make his philosophy as sensitive to the individual as it possibly can be[76].

Another such instance is to be found in the philosophy of John Duns Scotus (d.1308). Scotus' famous concept of *haecitas*, offsetting Aquinas' essence (*quidditas*), aims to account for the individuality of material things without resorting to the widely held opinion that it results when universal form is individuated by matter, a view which makes individuation something external to form, which itself remains universal and undifferentiated. For Scotus, *haecitas* operates within form itself. If in Aquinas' philosophy *quidditas* is a principle which functions within form to lead it to produce a particular kind of thing when acting on matter, Scotus' *haecitas* is a principle which functions within form to leads its action on matter to produce a particular *individual* thing. For Scotus, then, individuation is not to be viewed as the result of a thing's accidental properties, but is instead seen as an irreducible feature of its reality, vouchsafed at an essential level[77].

Both Scotus and Aquinas are concerned to address as closely as possible the differentiating features of individual things, and display in their different ways an awareness that existents cannot be adequately

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76. For a detailed discussion of this aspect of Aquinas' ethical writings see below, pp.135-37.

77. See Gilson, *History*, pp.461-62, 766-67n..

described by attending merely to what is universal in them. Both develop strategies which aim to give the fullest possible consideration to those areas where contingent realities depart from the simplicity of the ideal, or where existence exceeds the limits which are defined by its informing universal principles.

Many of the contemporaries of Scotus and Aquinas, however, are not so sensitive to such matters. Indeed, the example of Scholastic literary theory shows that even within an analytical schema whose ethical emphasis demands an awareness of ideal values as something actually lived, exegetes of both Platonic and Aristotelian bents consistently make universal norms rather than contingent facts the prime focus of their attention. The generally-held principles that universals preceded particulars in the order of being (even if, from the Aristotelian perspective, the priority was reversed in the order of knowing), and that this order of being involved an ontological hierarchy rising from things through their universal forms to the divine Ideas in the mind of God, tend to reinforce the assumption that what is universal in existence is also what is highest therein and thus most worthy of attention, being closest to God. It is perhaps due to the influence of this deep-seated assumption in realist thought that late-medieval philosophers seem to have been unable to emulate the nuanced approach which enables Scotus and Aquinas to balance a focus on universals with a due appreciation of particularities.

Consequently, one finds that something of a polarity develops. Many thinkers continue, in the spirit of Henry of Ghent, to insist on the importance of intellectually grasping universal principles in their simple forms, refusing to prioritise the examination of how such simplicity is diluted when acting on concrete realities. The example of Scholastic exegesis testifies to this much. Conversely, however, a line of thought develops which forcefully privileges the individual over the universal, and in doing so departs radically from realist philosophies, tending in fact to undermine or deny the claim that universals have any substantial basis whatever.

Gilson outlines the philosophical positions of a number of the key figures in this line of development. He describes the thought of Durand of Saint-Pourcain (d.1334) thus:

> According to Durand, [...] all that which exists is singular by itself and the principle of individuation lies in the very nature of the thing. Since it exists, a thing is an individual, because, since they exist, both its form and its matter are individual. Now, if everything that exists outside of the intellect is individual, there is nothing universal in reality.
>
> (*History*, p.475)

Universal concepts are seen as resulting from 'a mere consideration of the intellect leaving out the individuating conditions of the thing.' (pp.475-6) Peter Auriol (d.1322) differs from Durand in retaining some real basis for universal concepts, but his position is again, far from any conventional form of realism. For Auriol, universal concepts are produced by the mind's assimilation of a resemblance (*similitudo*) between different things, this resemblance being an actual property of the things themselves, rather than merely a mental construct. Nevertheless, while having a basis in reality, such universal concepts are not in any way related to a defining ontological principle therein. Auriol's universal is not an informing force which determines a thing's nature and guides it towards the fullest realisation of that nature. Rather, the concept is simply the singular thing as it appears to the intellect. As such, while certainly having a real basis, a universal concept nevertheless offers only an impression of a thing's reality, rather than a direct grasp of that reality itself[78]. As Gilson remarks 'There is therefore only the knowledge of the singular which attains the real itself: *notitia individui demonstrati*.' (*History*, p.480) Moreover, universal knowledge of a thing, since it only consists in a partial impression of a singular, is subject to a considerable degree of error, as accidental circumstances can easily affect that impression. It is therefore necessary that universal knowledge can be tested against sense knowledge, which gives a more accurate reflection of the thing's reality. Knowledge of singulars, derived from the senses, is more certain than intellectual knowledge of universals[79].

Other instances are cited by Gilson, such as Henry of Harclay (d.1317) and William Farinier (d.1361), both of whom in a conclusion similar to that of Auriol define universal concepts as simply confused knowledge of an individual thing (though their means of arriving at this conclusion are quite different)[80]. But the fullest development of this

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78. Ibid., pp.479-80.
79. Ibid., p.480.
80. Ibid., pp.480-83.

tendency is found in the philosophy of the nominalist William of Ockham (d.c.1350). For Ockham and his school a universal is nothing more than a mental construct. Particular existents are seen as being individual and wholly separate things, ontologically prior to any universal concepts which might be derived from them.

Thus, Ockham states that 'universale non est aliquid reale habens esse subiectivum, nec in anime nec extra animae, sed tantum habet esse obiectivum in anima, et est quoddan fictum habens esse tale in esse obiectivo quale habet res extra in esse subiectivo. [...] Similiter, propositiones, syllogismi et huiusmodi, de quibus est logica, non habent esse obiectivum, ita quod eorum esse est eorum cognosci.'[81] As the final sentence indicates, as well as the universals predicable of many individuals, relations between individual existents are also seen as produced by an intellectual act, rather than subsisting in reality, as Sheila Delany observes:

> Another form of universal is the relation concept: similarity difference, paternity, causality, etc. These relation concepts also have no being, but are only an act of the intellect. Like other universals, the relation concept is a kind of shorthand, a convenient way to express several separate perceptions at once.[82]

Rather than something directly traceable to the structure of reality, such concepts become something produced purely by an act of mind, with no subsisting correlative in external reality.

The developments outlined above, occurring in the thought of a diverse range of thinkers, and receiving a systematic and influential formulation in the Nominalist school of Ockham, embody a strong tendency to afford ontological and cognitive privilege to the particular over the universal. In this they express a sense that universals, far from being the highest level of material reality, to which the consideration of singular existents should always be referred, in fact only represent a partial representation of what is real. For Durand they constitute a consideration of singulars which excludes, rather than transcends, what is individual about them. For Auriol they are the partial impression which singular things make on the intellect, this impression being more

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81. William of Ockham, *In Sententiae*, I, ii, 8, excerpted in Stephen Chak Tornay, *Ockham: Studies and Selections* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1938), p.132.

82. Sheila Delaney, 'Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late-Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought', in *Medieval Literary Politics*, pp.19-41 (pp.36-7).

or less distinct according to perspective (the degree of vagueness being what produces and distinguishes concepts of species and genus). For Henry of Harclay and William Farinier they are a confused knowledge of a thing's particular reality, while for Ockham they are simply a mental fiction. All these perspectives suggest that a universal is fundamentally a misperception or partial undestanding of a thing's actual and full reality. What they emphasise is universalising thought's inadequacy in providing knowledge of a particular reality which it can only ever incompletely represent, and they insist on a concomitant imperative that those aspects of reality which exceed the bounds of the universal must receive due attention in themselves. These thinkers thus participate in and respond to a changing understanding of the nature of individual things, the beginnings of which which Jorge J.E. Gracia has detected in the twelfth century:

> There seemed to be not only a greater understanding of individuality but also a growing awareness that individuality is much more important than had been thought before and that its place and role in a complete ontology would have to be accounted for at greater length. Indeed, there was a tendency towards a more nominalistic approach in which individuality was considered at least as important as universality in the makeup of the universe and its description.[83]

It is perhaps puzzling that the refinements which thinkers such as Aquinas and Scotus introduced to their consideration of the relation between the universal and the singular in order to afford greater respect to the individual did not serve to prevent the polarisation which occurred. Certainly, Ockham and the other above-noted thinkers saw little or nothing in realist thought to recommend it as something capable of adequately addressing particular reality. This is hardly surprising when fourteenth-century Augustinian scholars such as John of Rodington and Hugolin Malabranca of Orvieto are making no effort to address it adequately, continuing to minimise the value of sense knowledge in itself. John points out that knowledge of sensible things can only be held as valid through the light of divine illumination which allows one to grasp the truth of a proposition through reference to the divine Ideas, thus privileging intelligible realities as providing the only grounds of

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83. Jorge J.E. Gracia, 'The Legacy of the Early Middle Ages', in *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation 1150-1650* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp.21-38 (p.33).

certainty. It is to these that the mind must ultimately be turned. Hugolin dismisses all the arguments and proofs of philosophy, arguing, like John, that human reason can only achieve knowledge through divine illumination. This leads him to dismiss completely the value of ethics as a science, affirming, as Gilson observes, that 'Ethics is superfluous to the faithful.' (*History*, p.454) The principles of moral virtue are provided by revelation, and any confusion of the simplicity of these principles which might result from considering them in relation to actual circumstances is to be avoided[84]. (See Gilson, *History*, pp.453-4) Such thinkers, alarmed by the uncertainty of sense knowledge, remain inclined to avoid it, giving themselves over to the inbuilt tendency within realism to hierarchically elevate the ideal over the actual[85].

There is also a tension within Aristotelianism itself which may have exacerbated the problem. Aristotelian epistemology gained considerable ground in the later Middle Ages, combining with more Platonic elements to inform the thought even of Augustinian thinkers such as Scotus[86]. Assigning forms the status of universal reality, and at the same time insisting that they are found only in compound with matter within particular things, Aristotelianism is based on two premises which tend to oppose each other. Form is affirmed to be a universal, having a unity which transcends the diverse things in which it operates, but it becomes difficult to see how it can exist only within singular things without itself being singular and separate in each of them[87]. Thus Scotus, despite attempting to make his philosophy sensitive to the irreducible importance of individuated existence, has his arguments torn apart by Ockham, who seizes and ruthlessly on the difficulties outlined above[88]. Given this situation, one can understand how many thinkers, wishing to preserve the access of the human mind to general truths founded in reality, were reluctant to give close consideration to universals

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84. On John of Rodington and Hugolin Malabranca, see Gilson, *History*, pp.453-54.

85. This uncertainty is recognised and addressed by Aquinas in his ethical consideration of the relation between universal norms and specific circumstances. See for instance, *ST*, II-II, xlix, i, and below, Ch.3, pp.135-37.

86. See Gilson, *History*, pp.447, 462-3.

87. On this problem as it occurs in Aristotle's thought, see Gilson, *Being*, pp.50-51. Gilson, however, is inclined to view Aquinas as having adequately addressed and dealt with this problem, as his remarks on the relation between *esse* and *essentia* here indicate. See ibid., p.51, and cp. *History*, p.368.

88. See William of Ockham, *Summa*, I, xvi.

in their relation to individuated realities. The diffraction of the unity of universals which results from such an analysis risks exacerbating the effects of a tension, already present, which erodes the grounding of such concepts in external reality, thus undermining the authority of the form of knowledge which they provide.

One can equally understand the privileging of singulars by Nominalist and proto-Nominalist thinkers. The proto-nominalists often aim to provide some objective basis for universals and singulars: for Peter Auriol they derive from a common quality of resemblance, while for Henry of Harclay they designate a nature which is in the thing, but singular (i.e. when we predicate 'man' of Plato, we are not designating the same thing as when we do so of Socrates[89]). But while providing some real basis for universal concepts, all of them show a clear discomfort with the idea that universals exist in things *as universals*, and they accordingly make the relation between universal concept and objective reality ever more indirect. Ockham, characteristically, takes the problem to its logical conclusion, denying that it is possible to simultaneously consider universals as having any form of unity and as being predicated of a diversity of things unless one sees them as having a purely mental existence[90]. Such a position, with its extreme ontological and epistomological privileging of singulars, is far removed from the flexibility of Aquinas' thought on the relations between particulars and universals. But if those who came after Aquinas were unable to emulate the balanced and nuanced nature of Aquinas' thought, it is perhaps ironic that one of the major contributions to this inability was the tensions within the Aristotelian philosophy for whose deep influence Aquinas himself was largely responsible.

Scholastic literary theory exists in a particularly pointed relation to these philosophical tensions. The Scholastic tendency to address the problematic nature of literature by subordinating its significative structure to an external and ideal meaning becomes highly problematic when confronted with a developing sense that particular reality cannot be adequately addressed by modes of thought which afford ontological and epistemological privilege to simple universals. This awareness that individual things cannot be properly accounted for within the framework

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89. See Gilson, *History*, pp.480-82.
90. Ockham, *Summa*, I, xiv.

of universal categories places the internal coherence of the Scholastic model under considerable strain. In tending to privilege ideal values, that model finds itself unable to fulfil the imperatives of its ethical and affective emphasis which demands that literature be shown to address actual circumstances, being relevant to the lives of the audience. Equally, having as its organising basis a sense of the dangers of those aspects of literature which threaten to undermine a sense of the ideality of meaning, there is inscribed within Scholastic theory a trepidation about allowing the ideal basis of a text's significance to be diffracted, a process which gives ground to those very features whose reduction and containment lies at the very core of that theory's constitution. The developing sense of a gulf between the ideal and the actual thus initiates a tension between the two key emphases on which the Scholastic justification of literature is founded.

An awareness of this tension casts considerable light on Dante's literary strategies in the *Commedia*, which can be seen to be aimed at addressing and resolving this developing tension. The poem's self-ironising emphasis on Dante's literary creativity responds to the ethical imperative of Scholastic literary theory by insisting that its significance is produced through an interpretation of reality derived in and for a specific set of circumstances. It thus aims to produce on the part of the audience an awareness that their response will require their own self-examining act of interpretation if they are to arrive at an understanding of the *ordo* which Dante depicts which will be appropriate to their own situation within it.

But while thus drawing attention to the creative and interpretative aspects of the *Commedia* which particularise its significance, Dante nevertheless avoids any risk that this might lead one to lose sight of meaning's grounding in a transcendent basis. The textualising features of the poem, while foregrounding the uncertainty which is attached to its significations, are at the same time organised in such a way as to permit that uncertainty to be accounted for and controlled within a theocentric framework. As is indicated in the image of the divine book with its leaves scattered throughout the universe, Dante presents the uncertainty which attaches to the *Commedia*'s worldly-orientated significance as being a consequence of the way in which the ideal enters the actual only in manifold obliquities, revealing itself in different aspects in different

circumstances, without being fully present in any of these. Any definition of the intelligible resonance of actual reality, in truly delineating one of many possible modes of adjustment between the contingent and the absolute, may thus have a relative degree of certitude in a restricted context, but it can never be paradigmatic, as it necessarily involves only a partial understanding of the ideal basis from which this certitude derives. The *Commedia* thus operates in such a way as to retain a sense of the grounding of meaning in the structure of reality, only qualifying this by insisting that an attention to the inadequacies which become apparent when any such meaning is considered in absolute terms is necessary in order that one can delimit the relative terms in which it may be deemed valid.

This constitutes a model of signification which, while inviting one to approach any given depiction of reality with a critical sense of its contingent limitations, nevertheless avoids any outright skepticism. Dante, while emphasising for ethical reasons the creative and interpretative aspects of his poem, thus equally responds to the Scholastic concern over the disruption of certitude which such emphases produce. In defining the operation of these potentially disruptive aspects of poetic discourse in theocentric terms, associating them with his poem's distance from the divine Word against whose informing and absolute authority its limitations are defined, Dante aims to balance the conflicting imperatives that meaning be assigned an absolute basis and related to the secular world. The self-referential strategies employed in the *Commedia* thus retain as a priority the need to relate actual reality to an ideal moral and spiritual order, while at the same time remaining aware of the oblique nature of this relation.

These aspects of Dante's literary strategy can be found among other late-medieval writers. In the English poem *Pearl*, which deals with the narrator's incapacity to comprehend his daughter's death or the Pearl maiden's attempts to console him by locating it within a spiritual and providential perspective, the centre of the poem is dedicated to a discussion of heavenly reward. The discussion begins with the Pearl maiden retelling the parable of the vineyard (Matt. xx, 1-16), her conclusion then being debated by the dreamer who disagrees with her, citing an alternative Biblical authority to justify his own point,

whereupon she in turn counters his arguments with a discourse on merit and grace[91].

Here one finds a structure wherein meaning begins with the singular certitude of the divine Word which underlies the Bible. This, however, is mediated through the indirect narrative form of Christ's parable, whose internal structure introduces a further dilution of ideal significance as singular meaning is spread across the multiple voices of the various characters. This parable itself is retold in the words of the Pearl maiden, and applied to issues raised in the particular situation of her encounter with the dreamer. This application is then tested against other passages from scripture and debated, before, finally, a conclusion is arrived at. In this the poem provides a powerful image of the necessary diffraction which the simple precepts of divine Wisdom must undergo in their application to particular circumstances. *Pearl* thus expresses a sense of the ultimate anchorage of human representations in the authority of the divine Word. But it equally underscores the distance between them which results from the poverty of human vision and which necessitates the indirect and imperfect forms in which divine Wisdom is made manifest, among which are the imaginative representations which the poem itself so artfully employs[92].

In pointing to its own splendid artifice as an imperfect representation of the mysteries which it reveals, and as a necessary concession to the limits of human vision, *Pearl* employs a literary strategy found in the works of yet other late-medieval writers. One thinks of the ironic structure of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where the diverse generic conventions employed by the different speakers consistently undermine each other, reminding one of the varying circumstances which motivate their representations, and at the same time refusing priority to any one such representation as being the final word. Similarly, the quest in Langland's *Piers Plowman* for the meaning of 'dowel', 'dobet', and 'dobest' yields a number of definitions, each

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91. *Pearl*, in *Pearl; Cleanness; Patience; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson (Dent: London and Melbourne, 1976), pp.1-48 (Pass.IX-XI, ll.481-660).

92. For a reading of *Pearl* which clearly explicates these aspects of the poem, see A.C. Spearing, 'The Gawain-Poet's Sense of an Ending', in *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.195-215.

adequate for specific circumstances, but each of which undermines the others so that none can be taken as the final statement on the matter.

Chaucer, Langland, and the *Pearl* poet all provide modes of representation which place a strong emphasis on the circumstances in which and for which meaning is constructed. But they also have a powerful sense of the limitations with which that circumstantial basis imbues meaning, undermining the *sententiae* which they produce, and thus pointing to the inadequacy of their claims to final certitude, which always remains, in this world at least, an unrealisable ideal goal. In this they can be seen to share the key concerns of Scholastic literary theory. Their close attention to the relation between meaning and local circumstance preserves the ethical imperative which demands that the significance derived from a text be related to one's actual life. Their accent on the inadequacies of such particularised meaning maintains a privileging of ideal values *per simplice* against whose certitude the limitations of any contingently bounded significations are defined.

The new modes of signification which develop in the works of these writers can thus constitute a response to the growing tension between these idealising and particularising requirements, radically extending the self-ironising tendency which was already inscribed within Scholastic literary theory, and exploiting the potential for transformation which that tendency provides. Thus, viewed in relation to the problems which were emerging in Scholastic literary theory in the fourteenth century, the literary strategies of these writers can be seen as participating, along with Dante, in a general response to those problems. And as with Dante, while the emphases of the modes of signification which they develop differ considerably from what is found in academic Scholasticism, this response can be seen to share and indeed to be driven by its fundamental priorities.

Robert Henryson, writing in the latter half of the fifteenth century, comes late to this line of development. Indeed, Henryson has been linked to the humanistic attitudes towards literature which were very much on the rise throughout Europe[93], bringing with them a strong sense of the divine nature of human creativity, and a philological sensibility which was increasingly aware of the historical and cultural circumstances in

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93. See, for instance, John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp.21-3.

which texts were produced[94]. These attitudes were being adapted in the fifteenth century in ways which depart from the emphasis which they receive in, for instance, the *Commedia*, in which Dante's awareness of the inadequacies of such contingently-grounded meaning prevent him from adopting the more straighforward positive celebration of such elements which one finds in later humanism. This might suggests that Henryson is to be viewed in a context which in many ways markedly departs from the world of Scholasticism.

John MacQueen, in arguing for the influence of continental humanism in Henryson's work, distinguishes between southern and northern humanism. The latter, within which he situates Henryson, is seen as involving much less of a break with medieval attitudes, instead producing an integration of the new and the old[95]. MacQueen's location of Henryson at an interstice of medieval and humanistic literary attitudes provides a valuable perspective, suggesting that Henryson's work resists any simple alignment with either Scholasticism or humanism, being critically distanced from both.

In the following chapters it will be argued that Henryson's engagement with Scholastic literary theory is profound and involves a deep commitment to its priorities and a clear-sighted and sophisticated consideration of the problems which accompany them. But where the works of writers such as *Dante* and the *Pearl* poet constitute assured statements which address and confidently propose a resolution of the tensions implicit within Scholastic literary theory, Henryson's approach is much more anguished. Writing at a time when the literary innovations of Dante and other writers are being developed in directions which give those innovations a quite different emphasis, Henryson is profoundly aware of the dangers which accompany them. Thus, the difficulties which result from the tensions between the ethical and idealising imperatives of Scholastic literary theory appear in his work as an almost insurpassable obstacle. Henryson is deeply conscious of the need to modify the emphasis of academic Scholasticism if the moral utility of literature is to be maintained, developing literary strategies which in

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94. On these aspects of Renaissance literary humanism, see A.C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.1-14.

95. MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp.22-3.

many instances bring him closer to humanist positions. But he is equally suspicious of the direction in which such transformation tends. The impulse for and direction of Henryson's creative modifications, along with the reservations with which he regards them, derive from and maintain the essential concerns of Scholasticism. These concerns are for Henryson deeply problematic, a fact which prevents his work from settling into any neat conceptual synthesis, whether Scholastic or otherwise. This, however, does not imply any incoherence on Henryson's part. Rather, his texts provide a detailed and sophisticated consideration of the tensions which inhabit late-medieval thought on literature, with these tensions providing a fulcrum around which the fluidity of his work is organised.

Chapter Three

Against Hasty Credence: Henryson on the Uses and Abuses of Poetry

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> And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.
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> (2 Tim.: 4, iv)

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One of the most striking features of Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*, and one which has received much attention from critics, is the frequent occurence of strong disjunctions between the apparent sense of the tale and the readings proffered in the *moralitas*. In this chapter it will be argued that Henryson's manipulation of these disjunctions becomes more intelligible and can be seen to be highly subtle when considered in relation to the background of Scholastic literary theory. Before examining this relation, however, it will be useful to look at the disjunctions which appear in two of the fables: 'The Trial of the Fox' and 'The Cock and the Jasp'. The chapter will go on to examine some different modern critical reactions to the Henrysonian disjunctions, along with the assumptions underlying those reactions, and examine how they fail to provide an adequate account of the fables. It will be seen that the manipulation of the dichotomies between tale and *moralitas* in these two fables draws and reflects significantly upon Scholastic literary theory, and that this casts new light upon the import of the disjunctive patterns identified by other critics.

Often in the *Fables*, figures who within the framework of the story appear admirable are interpreted in the *moralitas* as representing something evil. This can be seen in 'The Trial of the Fox', in which a moralising voice is introduced in the tale, denouncing the fox's attempt to avoid coming to the attention of the lion:

> O fylit spreit, and cankerit conscience!
> Befoir ane roy ren*3*eit wih richteousness
> Blakinnit cheikis and schamefull countenance!
>
> (ll.971-73)

The poem continues in this vein over two stanzas which conclude with a moral injunction, instructing us to 'Luke to this tod, how he wes in effray, / and fle the filth of falset,' (ll.982-93). The lion thus appears as an image of powerful virtue cowing the ungodly, and this seems consonant with his actions in the fable, where he insists on peace between the animals and hears the complaints of those who have been exploited, in order that amends can be made[1].

Yet having been offered this moral in the tale, we find that this 'roy ren3eit with richteousness' is taken in the *moralitas* as 'the warld be liklynace' (l.1104), whose attractions virtuous people abjure. It seems odd that the fox, who is allegorised as temptation and who in the story is wicked (if roguishly appealing), should seek to avoid the world. But the poem does not engage with this problem: the incident of the fox seeking to avoid the lion is simply not mentioned in the *moralitas*. The positive presentation of the lion in the fable, which has already provided a perfectly good moral, is also pointedly ignored in the *moralitas*. This exclusion is all the more striking for the fact that the earlier moralisation has already reinforced the impression given by the literal presentation of the lion.

A similar disjunction appears in the first of the *Fables*, 'The Cock and the Jasp', which establishes from the outset of the collection a pattern that recurs throughout. The two sides of this disjunction are embodied in an ambiguity which appears in the very first stanza, where the cockerel is described as 'cant and crous, albeit he was bot pure' (l.65). The adjective 'crous' could mean either conceited and boastful, or lively and spirited. If the former meaning is taken, the phrase suggests that the bird has an opinion of himself far above the humility of his station. The latter meaning, however, would agree with 'cant', meaning brisk or smart, thus giving a positive impression of the cockerel as refusing to be weighed down by his poor condition.

The tale, in fact, appears to resolve the ambiguity in favour of the latter possibility. The cockerel's diligence in rising 'sone by day' (l.66) is contrasted to the slackness of the 'daimisellis wantoun and insolent' (l.71) who are supposed to have carelessly swept the jewel from the house. His opinion that the jasp is of no real use to him seems perfectly reasonable

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1. See 943-49, 1068-1086.

given the needs of a farmyard bird. Furthermore, his rejection of it is grounded in a clear sense of the gulf between its value and the appropriate requisites for his own social status. This sense of the stone's worth is shown in the gradual expansion of the details of the appropriate setting for the jasp which appears in the three rhetorical questions of his high-style panegyric to the stone[2]:

> Quhar suld thow mak thy habitatioun?
> Quhar suld thow duell bot in ane royall tour?
> Quhar suld thow sit, bot on ane kingis crown
> Exalt in worschip and in grit honour?
> (ll.106-9)

The only point where it is suggested that the cock has misjudged the true value of the jasp is in the stanza which describes, in the tradition of the medieval lapidary, how the stone can protect and empower its owner by its innate virtues (ll.120-26). Yet this is a strange and awkwardly situated stanza which by no means resolves the issue, and I shall discuss its significance later.

Despite all those aspects of the tale which reflect favourably on the cockerel, the *moralitas* refuses to bestow any positive judgement on him. Instead, it announces that the jasp 'betakinnis perfite prudence and cunning' (l.128) and compares him to 'ane fule [...] / Quhilk at science makis bot ane moik and scorne' (ll.142-43). The authority of the *moralitas*' reading is strengthened by Biblical references, from both Old and New Testaments. John MacQueen has pointed out that there are general parallels with several passages from *Proverbs* and the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, along with two specific references to the Sermon on the Mount[3]. This suggests that, despite disagreeing with the initial favourable impression given of the cockerel in the tale, the *moralitas* does contain a store of wisdom, and should be heeded.

Yet any attempt to review the initial impression given by the tale so as to see if any interpretative error can be found must meet with little fruit. Such an attempt might find some encouragement in the tale's assertion that 'To get his dennar set was al his cure' (l.67), and the

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2. For a similarly positive assessment of the cockerel, see George Clark, 'Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transformed', *English Literary History*, 43, Spring (1976), 1-18. For a more negative reading see Denton Fox, 'Henryson's Fables', *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 337-56, and also the views of John MacQueen discussed later in this chapter.

3. John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp.100-5.

cockerel's concern with filling his 'tume intraill' (l.91), which could be taken to suggest a prioritising of sensual gratification over spiritual matters. This reading places much weight on the phrase 'al his cure', treating it as a sweeping statement about the cock's general outlook on life rather than as a statement about his priorities on the particular morning in which the tale is set. But it is by no means clear that the phrase has such a general application. At most, the support which the tale provides for the *moralitas*' interpretation derives from possible overtones rather than clear signalling. Moreover, such implicit suggestions of the cock's possibly negative moral status do nothing to counter those points where the tale explicitly challenges the reading provided in the *moralitas*. Far from mocking and scorning the jasp, the cockerel praises it in the highest terms. The intelligence of the cock's arguments, and his evident respect for the jasp, belie any obvious analogy between him and a scornful fool. And indeed, the most difficult objection to such an analogy must be that while wisdom may be of value to a fool, it remains difficult to see how a precious stone could be useful to a cockerel.

2

Such disjunctions in Henryson's *Fables* have spawned a number of critical reactions which seek to account for them in various ways. Some critics seek to harmonise the dichotomies which appear by arguing that the narrative sections of the fables are to be interpreted almost wholly in the light of the *moralitates*. Stephen Khinoy's reading of 'The Cock and the Jasp' provides one such privileging of the *moralitas*' view of the cockerel. He cites the 'lapidary' stanza as evidence that the jewel has hidden properties of which the bird is unaware. But dissatisfied with this he turns to conventional allegorical meanings:

> The admittedly remarkable qualities of the jacinth still might not be of much use to a dunghill cock. Henryson, however, has selected the jacinth because it has three major allegorical meanings [...].[4]

These are then listed as Adam and his sin, wisdom, and figural poetry of the same sort as Henryson's *Fables*. The word 'however' here suggests that the introduction of an allegorical perspective somehow resolves the

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4. S. Khinoy, 'Tale-Moral Relationships in Henryson's *Moral Fables*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 17 (1982), 99-115 (p.103).

issue of the jewel's value, showing us how it was indeed of use and that the cock was wrong to reject it. The suggestion is that an awareness of the conventions of medieval symbolism would have predisposed the audience to consider the cockerel foolish and view the jasp as allegorically representing positive spiritual values, and that the *moralitas*' judgement is therefore quite in line with the fable's narrative.

Such privileging of allegorical meanings, however, begs the question. Regardless of whether wisdom would be useful to a fool, the fact remains that a precious stone would be of little use to a bird. Allegorical meaning does not swamp the literal sense in the way Khinoy suggests here, and the significance which incidents or details have within the narrative context in which they occur cannot simply be identified with their allegorical meanings. If this were the case, twelfth-century exegetes of the Biblical story of David and Uriah would have had to argue that if David represented Christ then his murder of Uriah was in itself a good deed. Needless to say, they argued no such thing, content to allow for several discrete levels of meaning[5].

John MacQueen, in the reading of 'The Cock and the Jasp' offered in his *Robert Henryson* also attempts to harmonise tale and *moralitas*, arguing that the implications of the story support the viewpoint of the *moralitas*: 'Clearly, the cock's action is wilful and foolish.' (p.109) But demonstrating this requires some rather strained reading. MacQueen argues that the *moralitas*' interpretation is anticipated in the tale, citing the description of the cock as 'Rycht cant and crous, albeit he was bot pure' (l.65) as evidence that the bird has ideas above his station (p.107). But this underplays the ambivalence of the line, which as was pointed out above, could equally imply that he refuses to be disspirited by his lowly material status.

MacQueen proceeds to argue that generally in the Middle Ages 'the cock, as in the *Moralitas* of the *Taill of Schir Chantecleir and the Fox*, is a type of pride, in the present instance false intellectual pride.' (p.107) This, however, merely repeats Khinoy's error of assuming that the significance of narrative details is determined by conventional allegorical meanings, an assumption which verges on Robertsonianism and is not validated by the practice of medieval exegesis. Furthermore, while the

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5. For discussion of twelfth-century exegesis of the story of David and Uriah see *Authorship*, pp.103-7.

cock is often taken as a type of pride in the Middle Ages, and Henryson's moral is in fact a conventional one, there is clear evidence that more varied interpretations of cockerels were possible. Douglas Gray, querying the assumption that the cock would automatically be identified with folly, has observed that Lydgate's version of this fable offers a moral in which the cock represents the virtuous man who avoids 'all ydelnesse' and contents himself with 'suffisaunce'[6]. It seems then that not all medieval interpreters of fictional cockerels felt constrained by conventionally ascribed meanings.

MacQueen's argument continues with the assertion that the cock's folly is demonstrated by the fact that he 'clearly recognises the worth of the jasp', while nevertheless rejecting it for what he knows to be of inferior value (p.107). Yet in the light of fables such as 'The Two Mice' and 'The Wolf and the Wether', with their emphasis on the folly of seeking to rise above one's given social status, the rejection of something appropriate to a superior station can hardly be condemned. Finally, it is argued that 'the things that he loves are grossly physical' (ibid.). This overlooks the fact that the jasp itself is physical: considered as a precious stone it has material and aesthetic value, while all its magical properties outlined in the lapidary stanza serve only to protect the owner from physical harm. In the terms of the cock's argument the rejection is not of the spiritual in favour of the grossly material. Rather, he rejects superfluity in favour of sufficency.

Thus, the tensions and ambivalences of the fable cannot easily be argued away. While John MacQueen is certainly right in arguing that the *moralitas*' Biblical references lend an authority to its reading which prevent its outright rejection, his claim that this should lead to a simple acceptance of it is unwarranted:

> One may probably assume that Henryson and his audience were prepared to accept Biblical authority as final. The Biblical references thus provide a norm by which the relative validity of point of view in *Taill* and *Moralitas* may be indicated.
> (p.106)

This is to miss the point entirely. The authority of the Bible may be unquestioned, but the relevance of a given passage to particular circumstances is not, and it is the relevance rather than authority of the

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6. Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p.122.

moralitas which is the issue here. The conflict between the *moralitas*' claim that the cockerel is like a fool who makes 'moik and scorne' of wisdom, and the bird's clear respect for the jasp and awareness of its value prevents any identification of the *moralitas*' reading with the implications of the tale itself.

Other critics have taken the view that Henryson's tales and *moralitates* are not in agreement and base their readings on this assumption. Geoffrey Tillotson, adopting a viewpoint common among earlier critics, considers the use of the *moralitas* as no more than a clumsy attempt by Henryson to make his fables doctrinally acceptable, as though he were carried away in the act of writing and then had to attempt to restrain the exuberance of the narrative by containing its implications within the interpretative frame of the *moralitas*[7]. The same suggestion is made by Kurt Wittig in seeking to explain the tension between tale and *moralitas* in 'The Cock and the Jasp': 'It seems almost as if the poet has allowed his own colourful fable to run away with him, and is now returning to his duty'[8].

A more sophisticated view of the disharmony between tale and *moralitas* is given by H.E. Tolliver, who considers that there is a closely determined thematic disharmony between the tales' sympathetic perspective on the difficulties presented to their protagonists in a fallen world and the *moralitas*' adoption of a more judgemental view. In 'Robert Henryson: From *Moralitas* to Irony' Tolliver argues that Henryson seeks to balance moral judgement with sympathy for his protagonists and thus adopts 'an ironic mode capable of embracing both extremes'[9].

This tension between sympathetic and judgemental attitudes is later taken up by George Clark as the dominant structural and thematic characteristic of the *Fables*, though with a very different, more pessimistic, emphasis. Clark sees the characters as caught up in a deterministic world where they have no clear vision of the judgement their actions will bring down on them, and where their power of choice is

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7. Geoffrey Tillotson, 'Henryson's Fables', in *Essays in Criticism and Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942), pp.1-4.

8. Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1958), p.40.

9. H.E. Tolliver, 'Robert Henryson: From *Moralitas* to Irony', *English Studies* 46 (1965), 300-9 (p.306).

severely limited[10]. He too argues for a dichotomy between the two sections, but where Tolliver considers this a strategy for harmoniously comprehending opposing perspectives, Clark considers these perspectives thoroughly divergent. Henryson is seen as attacking what is seen as the harsh misanthropy of Aesopic fable, with its simple moral dictates. Clark argues that the disjunctions which appear tend to undermine the *moralitates* by showing the inadequacy of their simple moral imperatives when contrasted with the constraints and complexity of the world to whose inhabitants they are addressed. For Clark, Henryson's message is that such an inhabitant is seen as 'more suffering than sinning, less a free agent with unambiguous moral choices than the victim of his inescapable environment.' (pp.5-6)

This is a view which presents important considerations for many of the fables, but it too has its limitations. Daniel M. Murtaugh, in an article which expresses a view of the *Fables* similar to that of Clark has some telling reservations about his own reading. He too considers that Henryson presents a picture of a world whose complexities and constraints deny the legitimacy of the *moralitas*' simple imperatives, and he takes this as the most important part of Henryson's vision. At one point he in fact describes the *moralitas* as a '*post facto* rationalisation'. This suggests that the *moralitas* is a retreat from the problems of the tale, rather than an attempt to address them, and in this his view seems in line with that of Clark[11].

But Murtaugh also admits that his reading is 'partial', deliberately focusing on what is excluded by the *moralitas*. (p.408) Since he also suggests that the *moralitas* contains a 'positive assertion of an order of values which must supplant the one at hand' (ibid), one might conclude that it is equally justifiable to concentrate on the *moralitates* as including that which the tales exclude. But while Murtaugh seems aware of the possible importance of the *moralitas*, Clark tends to see its moralising perspective as entirely undermined by the sympathy of the tale. Thus, in his reading of 'The Cock and the Jasp', Clark ignores the impact of the Biblical parallels pointed out by MacQueen in lending an authoritative tone to the *moralitas*' perspective, even if its applicability to this

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10. See above, p.101, n.2.

11. Daniel M. Murtaugh, 'Henryson's Animals', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14, Fall (1972), 405-21 (p.408n.).

particular tale remains in doubt. Such a consideration undermines Clark's view that the general value of such moral imperatives is being attacked, since it suggests a sense that the *moralitas*' insights may still be of value in other more appropriate circumstances. In privileging the perspective of the tale over that of the *moralitas*, Clark and Murtaugh both oversimplify the complexity of the relation between the two (though Murtaugh is at least rather more aware of this). In this respect, their perspectives seem to share some of the features of the views of earlier critics like Tillotson, in their tendency to underplay the significance of the moralising aspects of the *Fables*.

Furthermore, while this tension between sympathy and judgement is certainly an important feature of the *Fables*, it is not one which can be easily applied to all of the disjunctions between tale and *moralitas*. In 'The Trial of the Fox', for instance, a moralising voice appears in the tale which is no more sympathetic to the fox than the formal *moralitas*, but whose reading clashes with the later moral in its assessment of the lion. This suggests that the dichotomies are not merely organised around the sympathy/judgement opposition, but are more varied than Tolliver, Clark and Murtaugh suggest[12].

Finally, Evelyn S. Newlyn's 'Affective Style in Middle Scots' attempts to mediate between the harmonising and dichotomising approaches to the relation between tale and *moralitas*, with a perspective influenced by the reader-response theory of Stanley Fish[13]. Newlyn argues that the tales lead the reader into assenting to a morally erroneous view, only to have their error pointed out in the *moralitas*. This forces the audience to reassess their reading, alerting them to their own moral failings as indicated by their initial erroneous assent. Again, this is an important consideration for the *Fables*, especially those drawn from the Reynardian corpus, and I shall have occasion to return to it. But Newlyn's approach assumes too easily that the view of the *moralitas* will command assent and consign the initial impression given by the tale to the realms of error. As we have seen, this is not the case with 'The Cock and the Jasp'. Similarly, of the two suggested morals in 'The Trial

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12. For a more detailed critique of Tolliver's view in relation to a particular fable, see below, pp.127-34.

13. Evelyn S. Newlyn, 'Affective Style in Middle Scots: The Education of the Reader in Three Fables by Robert Henryson', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 26 (1982), 47-56.

of the Fox' it is hard to see how the one which harmonises with the tale's positive representation of the lion can be said to be in error, either from a moral or an interpretative standpoint. Furthermore, in Newlyn's readings, especially of 'The Cock and the Jasp', the fables do little to define precisely the type of error into which the audience is supposed to have fallen. At most, a general failure to think clearly about the action presented is pointed to. This seems a rather vague warning, especially given the value placed in the later Middle Ages on an affective literature which closely addresses the particular needs of the audience.

Many of the critical perspectives which I have outlined provide valuable insights into aspects of Henryson's *Fables*. But the poems consistently display aspects which do not fit with the tale/*moralitas* patterning suggested by any one hypothesis. Henryson's manipulation of the relations between the different parts of the fables is fluid and varied, defying any paradigmatic account. In my own approach I aim to take account of the flexibility of the fables' structuring and the complexity of attitudes which it suggests. An analysis of the *Fables*' relation to the Scholastic background will show that this complexity focuses on and is organised around a concern over the function and value of imaginative writing. This background illuminates the type of structuring found in 'The Cock and the Jasp' and 'The Trial of the Fox', and introduces a framework in which other patterns of disjunction which occur elsewhere in the *Fables* take on new resonances.

3

All the above-mentioned critical accounts of the tale/*moralitas* relation in the *Fables*, even those which try to take account of dichotomies, have as a key assumption the idea that the literary norm is one wherein the two should harmonise in a univocal statement. This is clear in the cases of Khinoy and MacQueen. The latter is certainly aware of the medieval tolerance for a range of different meanings being assigned to the same text, and its relevance to Henryson's work:

> Sometimes [...] the narrative detail will suggest one form of *sentence*, which, however, Henryson avoids in his *Moralitas* while concentrating on a particular interpretation of a single episode.
> (MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, p.100)

In this view an interpretation which does not agree with that suggested by the literal sense of the text is seen as part of a system of multiple significances which allows for different readings on different levels of the same text. However, to judge from his treatment of 'The Cock and the Fox', it seems that MacQueen, preferring harmonious variation to violent dissonance, balks at extending this insight to encompass the extreme divergence which characterises the different levels of meaning in Henryson's work.

In a different way, Evelyn S. Newlyn also seeks to resolve the conflicting meanings into a univocal statement by encompassing the apparent significance of the tale within an interpretative hierarchy which privileges the meaning suggested by the *moralitas*. Within this reader-response framework the interpretation suggested by the tale is invoked only as an initial, erroneous interpretation, with the meaning finally coming to rest in the authority of the *moralitas*. Again, the text closes on a univocal statement.

Murtaugh and Clark, although aiming to take account of the dichotomies, actually tend towards a view similar to Newlyn's. Both are inclined to see the moralising aspect of the *Fables* as being undermined by the tales, whose perspective they take as the dominant one. In this respect they ultimately tend, like Newlyn, to resolve the conflict they find in favour of one side. The main difference is that they choose the opposite side from Newlyn. Furthermore (and this is especially notable in Clark's view of Henryson as deliberately subverting the conventions of fable), their construction of the conflict between a sympathetic tale which precludes simple judgement and a harsh *moralitas* which insists on imposing it assumes that the *moralitas* aims to fully account for all the details of the tale. For both critics, the fables' disjunctive structuring is noteworthy in so far as it deviates from the expectation that meaning closes in the final judgement of the *moralitas*.

Tillotson and Tolliver, while also allowing for the co-existence of different and opposed meanings in Henryson's work, nevertheless also see it as a deviation from the norm of a singular meaning, and consider this deviation to have occurred for specific reasons. In Tillotson's opinion it stems from the need of a rather dour moralist to render the energetic fables acceptable to sober doctrine. From this viewpoint the plurality of meaning is essentially the result of Henryson's inability to arrive at a

coherent and balanced view of life. In Tolliver's view it results from the specific problems presented by the moralistic writer's need to reconcile sympathy and judgement, and is an effort to achieve precisely the balance that Tillotson sees as lacking. In both instances the differing perspectives of tale and *moralitas* are seen as deviations ascribable to certain peculiarities: for Tillotson, authorial temperament, and for Tolliver the special demands of a particular authorial role.

However, the readiness to offer readings which depart from the apparent sense of a text is a constituent feature of Scholastic exegesis, perfectly characteristic of its valorisation of moral utility and reduction of aesthetic considerations. An awareness of the heuristic tradition of Scholastic allegoresis of fabulous writings, and of the construction of *distinctiones* wherein conflicting meanings can be assigned to the same signifier without impinging on each other, should allow one to see that the disjunctive form of Henryson's *Fables* has a rigorously conceived methodological basis within the literary theory of his own day. Douglas Gray makes this connection in his book on Henryson, citing the *Ovide Moralisé* as an example, and quoting a fifteenth-century sermon by Bishop Fisher:

> [...] Allegory is open-ended, and alternative interpretations may be selected according to context 'by a dyvers consyderacyion', or 'held in mind' at the same time as two different perspectives, or as ironic alternatives. [...] The *moralitas* does not purport to give the final and exclusive meaning of the fable. It is not 'the moral message', but one possible and useful significance of it: it hardly gives an adequate account of the rich intentions of the fable and is obviously not intended to do so.
>
> (p.128)

Thus, the disjunctions which occur in the Fables are not a deviation from a norm of univocal meaning, but a standard feature of a familiar mode of exegesis associated with fabulous literature.

Henryson's debt to the practice of Scholastic exegetes is indicated by the stress throughout the *Fables* on the provisional nature of the morals. Almost all the *moralitates* open with assertions that this *may* be its meaning, or that the narrator *supposes* this to be a possible interpretation, always leaving open the possibility of other equally valid accounts. In this, Henryson expresses a view wherein particular readings are seen as actualising one aspect of a comprehensive body of significance which underlies and motivates the signs of the fictional text. This

produces a structure similar to that found in the *distinctione*, wherein the potential significance of a particular textual detail is extended beyond that suggested by the relations established within the particular structure of the text. Reading is opened onto an infinitude of potential permutations which relate the details of the text to diverse aspects of a network of external and prior meanings. Any one of these permutations can be valid and useful in the particular circumstances which elicit them, but no one can fully capture the divinely patterned framework which validates them.

This outlook underlies medieval writers' tendency to refer their work back to a prior *auctor* in a self-effacing manner, while nevertheless deviating from what that *auctor* has actually written. It similarly underlies the concept of *auctoritas* manifested in the exegetical practice of Scholastic commentators on literary texts, as described by Minnis:

> The commentators were more interested in relating the work to an abstract truth than in discovering the subjective goals and wishes of the individual author. The *intentio auctoris* - the intended meaning 'piously expounded' and rendered unimpeachable - was considered more important than the medium through which the message was expressed.
>
> (*Authorship* p.21)

The *auctoritas* associated with this *intentio auctoris* (as evoked by both writers and commentators) is an impersonal one. It is seen to consist in the consonance of the *auctor's* mind with the comprehensive harmony of the divine *ordo*. This allows the significative potential of a work to be seen as transcending the particularised limitations of a specific utterance: the 'subjective goals and wishes' embodied in an individuated 'medium'. Instead the specificities of a given text aquire a vast range of resonances through being subsumed within this prior comprehensive *ordo*. Any reading or translation of an *auctor*'s work, provided the exposition is consonant with Christian doctrine, can thus be seen as anchored in the intention of a previous *auctor* and partaking of his *auctoritas*, while at the same time being only a partial exposition of the overall intention which motivates a text. This permits the translator or expositor of an authoritative work to introduce his own innovations while simultaneously denying ultimate responsibility for them, as they are seen as the partial actualisation of the vast potential of meaning gathered in a prior *intentio auctoris*.

Guido da Pisa (d.c.1330) reflects this view in his commentary on Dante's *Commedia*. In his prologue he expresses a sense of the comprehensiveness of the poem's meaning by drawing Biblical parallels, comparing Dante's vision to that of the prophet Ezekiel, and drawing a further analogy between the *Comedy* and Noah's ark, whose three levels containing different types of animals is compared to Dante's visions of hell, purgatory and heaven[14]. He proceeds to claim that Dante writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

> Ipse enim fuit calamus Spiritus Sancti, cum quo calamo ipse Spiritus Sanctus velociter scripsit nobis et penas damnatorum et gloriam beatorum. Ipse etiam Spiritus Sanctus per istum aperte redarguit scelera prelatorum, et regum et principum orbis terre. (p.4)

Guido's insistence on Dante's divine inspiration may owe something to the development in thirteenth century Biblical scholarship of the concept of a *duplex causa efficiens*, which allowed exegetes to maintain an emphasis on the divine source of Biblical meaning while taking account of the individual contribution of the human author. In Biblical exegesis this concept allowed a closer attention to the specific motivations of the human writer, and contributed to a distrust of allegorical exegesis which was out of harmony with the literal sense[15]. Its use in Guido's commentary however has the opposite effect. The references to the inspiration of the Paraclete along with the comparisons to the Bible open Dante's text onto a comprehensive frame of reference. The particularising features of his work and his specific motivations in writing are included within this frame as valid considerations for understanding the text. But the *Commedia*'s meaning is now extended far beyond such constraints, being inscribed within a complex nexus of significance which make possible a host of latent meanings:

> Circa [...] causam finalem, nota quod autor istud opus composuit ad hunc finem principaliter, licet et multi alii possint assignare fines. (Ibid.)

Guido proceeds to enumerate four possible final causes, the first of which is to persuade people to abandon their sins. Guido takes this as Dante's

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14. Guido da Pisa, *Expositiones et Gloses super Comediam Dantis, or Commentary on Dante's* Inferno, ed. V. Cioffari (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974), p.2.

15. See *Authorship*, pp.79-84, Minnis & Scott pp.196-200. See also Evans, *Language and Logic*, pp.42-50.

primary motivation, also listing the desire to improve the style of others by his good example, the bringing to the attention of the world certain old poets who are now neglected but whose works contain much that is good and useful, and the condemnation of wicked prelates and nobles. But the assertion that 'multi alii' intentions can be assigned suggests that even more than these are possible. While Pietro thus takes account of certain determinate motivations, he refuses to limit the fullness of the text's meaning to these, ultimately assimilating them within the absolute authority and comprehensive vision of the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, Pietro Alighieri (d.1364) opens his commentary on the *Commedia* by stating that he is motivated to write by a conviction that the richness of the poem's meaning has not yet been fully tapped:

> Quamvis poema Comedie [...] dudum nonnuli calamo temptaverint aperire ita in suo integumento clausum et absconsum, licet in parte, nondum tamen in totum judicio meo illud utique peregerunt [...].[16]

He continues thus:

> Nitar et ego nunc [...] in alia quali particula illud si potero per modum Comenti ulterius etiam reserare [...]. Veniet inde tandem sic forsam et alius qui hijs nostris aminiculatibus ipsum librum portabit in humero, ut dicitur Job, capitulo xxxj [:36], ubi Glosa exponens hoc ait: *Portare librum in humero est scripture aperitonem perficere.*
>
> (Ibid., pp.1-2)

Pietro thus presents his commentary as a partial exposition of a rich complex of meaning. The writers of previous analyses of the *Commedia* have produced valid but limited insights on the text, which may be complemented by Pietro's own contribution. This in turn leaves open the possibility of yet other valid interpretations arising from the works of future exegetes. Both Guido and Pietro thus see the specificities of Dante's text as being subsumed within a wider framework of prior meaning. The *Commedia*'s potential resonances within this framework extend the poem's significance beyond the determinative power of the text and its immediate motivating contexts.

In the work of these exegetes, as in Henryson's *Fables*, the particular meanings suggested by the letter of the fictional text are seen as only one level of significance within a multi-layered structure. The

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16. Pietro Alighieri, *Il Commentarium Di Pietro Alighieri*, ed. R. Della Vedova and E. Ottoboniana (Florence: Olschki, 1978), p.1.

acknowledgement of the existence of such a wide set of possible meanings prevents the particularising aspects of the text from being assigned any determinative role in signification. Instead the text defines one aspect of a wealth of prior and external meaning, within which its details have many possible meaningful configurations beyond those established within the argument of the letter. In this way the determining influence of the letter of the poetic text is reduced, and the certainty that its meaning is authorised by the given structure of reality is maintained.

4

While Henryson's literary strategy in the above instances certainly draws on an established and sophisticated exegetical tradition, this does not mean that his treatment of the disjunctions between the letter of the text and the interpretation provided in the *moralitas* are unremarkable in the light of this tradition. Phillipa M. Bright, in an article which places Henryson's exegetical methods in a wider context of medieval techniques of figural and exemplative interpretation, observes that the disjunctions between different levels of meaning, and the tendency not to take into account all details of the passage being treated, are commonly accepted features of such methods. From this she draws the following conclusion:

> When Henryson's figurative methods are properly understood [...] what at first may appear to be discrepancies turn out, on closer inspection, to be accepted features of the traditions in which he is writing[17].

Bright's contextualisation of Henryson's methods is a welcome antidote to the assumption of a univocal meaning found in so many other critics. Some reservations remain, however, as to the degree of unity which she ascribes to the context within which she sets Henryson. While Bright observes a parallel between twelfth-century exegesis of the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba and Henryson's interpretative method in his fables[18], she omits the fact that, while after the twelfth century such approaches to the text were increasingly adopted in the interpretation of poetry, in Biblical scholarship the same period saw a reaction against them. This reaction was characterised by an emphasis

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17. Phillipa M. Bright, 'Figurative Techniques in Henryson's *Fables*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 25 (1990), 134-53 (p.153).

18. Ibid., pp.142-43.

on the importance of the literal sense as the arbiter of meaning, and an increasing reluctance to adduce allegorical meanings which were wildly disconsonant with it. Exegetes came to view texts as produced by individual authors writing in a manner appropriate to different particular sets of circumstances[19]. The concept of a *duplex causa efficiens* allowed exegetes to reconcile this new emphasis with the absolute authority of the Bible. The author was still seen as working under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who was seen as the primary efficient cause. But the human author was increasingly felt not to be merely the pen of the Paraclete, but to have expressed his divinely inspired meaning in a manner appropriate to his individual concerns and the particular circumstances within which he wrote[20].

Thus, rather than a unified approach to reading, there is in fact a clear distinction in the later Middle Ages between the exegetical modes applied to the Bible and to poetry. This suggests that, while there is certainly a consistency in interpretative practice in so far as each of these differing approaches tended to be seen as appropriate for a different mode of writing, there was nevertheless more potential for variance in attitudes towards exegetical procedures than Bright claims. I would therefore dispute her claim that an awareness of this context removes the problems caused by Henryson's disjunctions. Rather, the Scholastic tolerance of diverse significations in poetry should be seen as providing the background against which the problematisation effected by the dichotomies found in the *Fables* should be measured.

What distinguishes Henryson from his Scholastic forebears is his presentation of the relation between different levels of meaning, which appears much more strained than is usually found in Scholastic exegesis. Neither Guido da Pisa nor Pietro Alighieri show any explicit sense that the surface meaning of the text might prove an obstacle to their interpretative practice. Both simply assert their approach and proceed with it, secure in the belief that the letter of the text simply provides one interpretative permutation among others. In fact Pietro's comfort with the letter is such that he counsels his readers that not all parts of the text have allegorical significance, some only contributing to the literal level[21].

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19. See *Authorship*, pp.103-7. See also Minnis & Scott, pp.207-9.
20. See above, p.112, n.15.
21. Pietro Alighieri, *Commentarium*, pp.6-7.

Boccaccio does devote some time to excusing the obscurity of poetry and justifying the difficulty which may accompany the search for valid *sententiae* beyond the figments of the letter:

> Nec sit quis existimet a poetis veritates fictionibus invidia conditas, aut ut velint omnino absconditorum sensum negare lectoribus, aut ut artificiosores appareant, sed ut, que apposita viluissent, labore ingeniorum quesita et diversimode intellecta comperta tandem facient cariora. Quod longe magis Sanctum fecisse Spiritum unusquisque, cui sana mens est, debet pro certissimo arbitrari.
>
> (*De Gen. Deor.* Bk XIV, ch.xii, vol.II, p.716)

Yet for all Boccaccio's emphasis on the obstacles presented by poetry to the understanding, and on the intellectual effort involved in interpretation, these are evoked as being ultimately a virtue of poetry rather than a danger. The passage is closely followed by two quotations from Augustine which present such obscurity as enhancing one's sense of the rich body of significance concealed behind the text:

> Quod per Augustinum in libri Celestis Ierusalem XI firmare videtur, dum dicit: Divini sermonis obscuritas etiam ad hoc est utilitas, quod plures sententias veritatis parit et in lucem notitie producit, dum alias eum sic, alius sic intelligit. Et alibi Augustinus idem super Psalmo CXXVI dicit: Ideo forte obscurius positum est, ut multos intellectus generet, et ditiores discedant homines, qui clausum invenerunt, quod multis modis aperiretur, quam si uno modo apertum invenirent.
>
> (Ibid.)

This tendency to present the obscurity of the letter as ultimately facilitating a better understanding of the *sententia* is continued in the following chapter of *De Genealoge Deorum Gentilium*, where Boccaccio argues that poets are not liars, since lies are intended to deceive, while the evidently fictional nature of poetic texts is a clear sign that they must not simply be taken at face-value (see above, Ch.1, p.34, n.74). Thus, for Boccaccio, the obstacle to a proper understanding which the text presents is offset by the fact that the overtly fictional structure serves a self-erasing function. The evident emptiness of a poem's fictional significations indicate that they merely form a veil, to be drawn aside to reveal a variety of true and independent meanings, while serving a worthwhile instrumental role as an aid to understanding.

This sense of a comfortable relation between the letter of a text and allegorical readings of it, and the minimisation of the possibility of any interpretative conflict being provoked by discrepancies between them, is

widely reflected in the layout of text and commentary which appears in medieval manuscripts. In these the commentary generally appears around the text, in its margins, or even actually inserted within the body of the text. This minimises the conflict between the determinative force of the text and the countering force of the commentary in their battle over the grounds of meaning. For since no sense of the meaning of either can be attained without including an awareness of that of the other, then any sense of textual closure is pre-empted. The process of reading becomes at most a continual modification of perspective between parallel levels of meaning, with a sense that no one of these levels has the final word. Any unsettling effect which might be produced by disjunctions between these levels is comfortably contained within the mode of reading represented by this structure.

For Henryson, however, this containment is not so assured. In fact, a sense of the strong resistance of poetry to the Scholastic attempt to transcend the limitations of textuality is already evoked in Henryson's justification of poetic fiction in the 'Prologue' to the *Fables*. Here we are told that if meaning emerges from poetry as flowers from the earth and as the kernel of a nut from its shell, the earth is nevertheless 'bustious' and must 'be laubourit with grit diligence' (ll.8-9), while the nut's shell is 'hard and teuch' (l.15). This sense of difficulty also appears in the *moralitas* to 'The Trial of the Fox', where the determination of a good *sententia* is compared to the work of miners who 'Fair gold with fyre may fra the leid weill wyn' (l.1098). The task, while certainly possible, nevertheless seems fairly onerous.

Furthermore, this difficulty is also associated with danger. The very first line of the 'Prologue' refers to 'fein*3*it fabills', and the term 'fein*3*it' recurs throughout as a description of the fables. However, it is also frequently used as a description of the fox in Henryson's Reynardian fables. 'Fein*3*it', while referring to the fictionality of the poems, also has overtones of deceptiveness and dissimulation, suggesting that one has to be wary in approaching such writing[22]. This outlook, with its emphasis on the difficulty and risk associated with reading fictional texts, is particularly remarkable when considered as a description of the fable

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22. Henryson's ambivalent attitude towards fable has been noted by Lois A. Ebin in *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p.74.

genre, as it is traditionally seen as being the most transparent and least deceptive of fictions, even escaping the censure of the normally suspicious Augustine since no-one would be fooled by its evidently preposterous stories[23]. From Henryson's perspective it seems that the capacity to see through it is much weaker, and the risk of being fooled much stronger.

This view of poetry as both useful and potentially dangerous is thematised in the opening passages of Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*[24], notably in the account of Orpheus' genealogy with its description of the nine Muses and their origin. This lineage is outlined in stanzas five to nine and the figures described are very much concerned with poetry and music, thus emphasising Orpheus' role as poet-singer, and defining the qualities to which he is heir in this role. Hence the passage also functions as an account of the nature and uses of poetry. The poem opens by declaring that the recounting of a noble man's lineage in this manner is done 'So that his hert he mycht enclyne thare by / The more to vertu and to worthynes, / Herand reherse his eldirs gentilness' (ll.5-7). This refers the audience to the capacity of poetry to move its readers to virtue, and simultaneously indicates that the following genealogy will define this ideal capacity, since in Orpheus' case the ideal role defined by his ancestry is that of the poet. But the passage also raises the possibility that Orpheus and his poetic and musical powers may fall away from the perfection of this ideal, indicating that here too Henryson is concerned with the possible dangers of poetry:

> It is contrair the lawis of nature
> A gentill man tobe degenerate,
> Noucht folowing of his progenitoure
> The worthy reule and the lordly estate [...].
> (ll.8-11)

As we shall see, the recounting of Orpheus' lineage also deals with the ways in which poetry can be thus 'degenerate' and warns of the possible dangers which it involves.

In the genealogy we are first told that Orpheus' grandparents are Jove and Memoria, whose offspring are the nine Muses. Jove, as king of the Gods, was often identified with the Christian God, emphasising that Orpheus' poetic power is ultimately to be traced to a divine origin, while Memoria indicates its mnemonic function. Henryson's inclusion of these

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23. See above Ch.1, p.34, n.74.
24. In Fox, ed., *Poems*, pp.132-153.

figures is significant, recalling the Scholastic emphasis on poetry and fiction as a mnemonic and affective organising system which helps fix moral truths in the mind, thus leading its audience to the path of virtue and ultimately back to God through salvation. This is presented as the origin of Orpheus' lineage, the ideal point from which his powers may decline. At this origin, poetry is presented as an alliance of sensible imagery with divine wisdom.

The offspring of Jove and Memoria, the Muses who are the inspiration of poetry and song, comprise Orpheus' mother and aunts, and they too are described in significant terms. Of the first eight described some of them seem to embody the more sensual features of poetry and song, while some embody more rational aspects. Thus Euterpe and Melpomene are 'gude dilectacioun' (l.37) and 'as hony suete in modulacion' (l.39) respectively. 'Dilectacioun' is, of course, delight, while 'modulacion' refers to the harmony of her music. Pollymyo is described as she 'Quhilk could a thousand sangis sweetly sing', again stressing the sensual force of the songs' sweetness.

Caliope, interestingly since she is the mother of Orpheus, is given an unspecifying designation as 'of all musik maistresse' (l.44). The phrase could suggest a quasi-divine command over all aspects of music, combining both sensual and rational, and encompassing *musica mundana*, *musica humana*, and *musica mundana*. But situated as it is between descriptions of those muses who are associated with the sensual elements of music and the immediately following descriptions of those identified with its rational elements, it could equally suggest that Calliope remains uncommitted, in potency to either extreme. Tersicor, 'is gude instruction / Of ewiry thing' (ll.40-41), while Cleo is 'meditation / Of ewiry thing that has creation' (ll.48-49). Herato is, perhaps rather cryptically, described as she 'Quhilk drawis lyke to lyke in ewiry thing' (l.51). I take this to suggest that she represents the power of metaphor and analogy. This has a more than merely decorative force here, since as the phrase 'lyke to lyke' indicates, this power is based on a perception of real resemblances and thus connected to a perception of the structure of creation. Thelya is assigned a clear moral function:

Thelya syne, quihilk can oure saulis bring
To profound wit and grete agilitee
To vnderstand and haue capacitee.
(ll.54-6)

But although the moral function is emphasised here, Thelya is not simply identified with the rational as opposed to the sensual, for the emphasis on her affective power to move the soul suggests a combination of the two.

The stanza in which the last muse, Wranya, is described extends this combination of the sensual and the rational. Wranya represents not just harmony, but the music of the spheres, the 'armony celestiall' (l.59). This is the *musicus mundana* which is produced by the harmony and order of creation, and which embodies in eternal form those rules which are the source of terrestrial music. This connection between the celestial and the terrestrial is indicated by the fact that this harmony is 'Reioising men with melody and sound' (l.60): it is the ultimate source of the sensual pleasures of music. This passage thus looks forward to Orpheus' learning of the rules of harmony from the music of the spheres in ll.219-39. Furthermore, this is the stanza in which we are told that Caliope, whose relation to either reason or the senses is left ambivalent, weds Phebus, a god very much associated with reason.

Henryson gradually changes the relative weight given to the rational and the sensual in each stanza. The first of these stanzas contains two Muses associated with the sensual aspects and one with the rational features (Euterpe, Melpomene, and Tersicor), the second contains one neutral and one rational (Caliope and Cleo), while the third contains two with an emphasis on the rational and one sensual (Herato, Thelya, and Pollymyo). Furthermore, while the two are initially kept separate, the concluding descriptions of Thelya and Wranya give a sense of the powers of music and poetry as combining the rational and the sensual. Thus, taken as a whole, these stanzas suggest the combination of the intellectual and sensible powers in poetry and music. But considered as a progressive sequence, they suggest the possibility of the separation of these powers, and by placing an increasing importance on the rational, they emphasise that it should not be forgotten and that appreciation of the sensible ought to be combined with it. This is also suggested by the marriage of Caliope to Phebus. While in the description of the Muses, Caliope's allegiance to the sensible or the rational is left

uncertain, this uncertainty is resolved by her marriage. Her initially uncertain designation, however, implies the possibility that the music of which she is mistress, the 'sweit licour' which Orpheus sucks from her breast (l.70), need not necessarily be allied to reason but might remain separate. In these respects, the poem's account of the muses suggests that, to adapt the terms of the *moralitas*, the harp of eloquence might sound without reason playing upon it.

The opening passages of the poem, then, express an awareness of the possible dangers of poetry, and the terms in which this awareness is expressed associate it with the early-medieval distrust of imaginative writing. The division of poetry and music into sensual and rational elements, and the concern that the balance between these might be be lost (a concern on which the *moralitas* of *Orpheus* explicitly focuses) recalls the accusation that poetry rouses the passions. This evokes the traditional concern over the risk that the sensible forms of language might usurp a proper understanding of how their beauty and proportion is based in a universal *ratio* which transcends their material disposition. Henryson's sense of the dangerous aspects of imaginative writing is thus based around the fear that the poetic text will come to be seen as the arbiter of a meaning no longer grasped in its relation to prior truth, but only as a contingent construct, divorced from any ideal origin.

This concern is continued in the *Fables*, where the determinative influence of the poetic text is powerfully evoked. The difficulty which is foregrounded in the imagery of the 'Prologue' appears in the fables themselves as an interpretative conflict orientated around the problem of whether or not a reading is consonant with the literal sense of the tale. The strained relation between the letter of the text and the interpretations adduced is accentuated through Henryson's use of the binary tale/*moralitas* structure as it appears in 'The Trial of the Fox' and 'The Cock and the Jasp'. In these poems, the linear ordering of the different layers of meaning is much less reassuring about the relation between them than is the conventional layout of Scholastic commentary. Henryson's structure establishes a dynamic pattern wherein audience expectations are aroused, apparently satisfied within a settled reading (and one which in both poems seems morally sound), and then confounded. Such a pattern disorientatingly maximises on a *hermeneutic* level the interpretative conflict produced by extreme disjunctions between

text and allegorisation, and foregrounds the problems that such disjunctions present to the understanding.

This maximisation is achieved by yet other means in 'The Cock and the Jasp'. The effect of the ambiguity of 'crous' in the first stanza, discussed above, is to create an expectation that the *moralitas* may be in some way sanctioned by the text, and to increase the confusion at the disconsonance which still appears when more evidence of this is sought in re-reading. Furthermore, comparing the fable to its source in Gualterus Anglicus, one can see that this effect is one which Henryson's alterations seem designed to produce. The fable is expanded from a bare ten lines in Gualterus to ninety-seven lines in Henryson[25]. In the narrative, the major additions are those passages about the careless maids and the cock's panegyric to the jasp, which both reflect well on the bird. The *moralitas*' interpretation is essentially the same in both writers, but Gualterus' sparse telling of the story has nothing of the sympathetic detail added by Henryson. The main effect of this expansion is thus to emphasise the disjunction between narrative and *moralitas*, further heightening the interpretative difficulties.

Henryson's maximisation of the conflict between different levels of meaning thus markedly differs from the strategies of academic Scholastic commentators, and represents a significant development from the outlook of earlier theorists. Far from their assured containment of the disruptive influence of poetic textuality within an affective framework, Henryson stresses the determinative influence exerted by poetic language on the level of meaning, and sets this in open conflict with any attempt to reduce or transcend it. If, for Boccaccio, the failure to realise that poetic meaning involves more than is contained in the fictional letter is a gross misunderstanding of the obviously self-erasing nature of fiction, for Henryson such misunderstanding has become a much more immanent possibility.

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Despite this more overtly suspicious attitude towards the poetic text, Henryson still remains committed to the Scholastic model of literature.

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25. For Gualterus' latin version, see Fox, ed., *Poems*, p.194.

The *moralitas* of 'The Trial of the Fox' states the priority which should govern reading when it declares that the material of poetry is orientated 'to our leuing' (l.1102). This assertion shifts the grounds of interpretative decision from a hesitation based on a hermeneutic concern over consonance with the text, to one where selection is made according to the moral requirements of a given reader. In 'The Cock and the Jasp', the *moralitas*' injunction not to scorn wisdom reflects similarly on the interpretative problem which has been posed. Both the narrative and the *moralitas* suggest perfectly sound morals, with the former being a perfect illustration of the point made in 'The Two Mice', that 'Quha has aneuch of na mair hes he neid' (l.375). To dismiss either of them as wrong would thus be to fall into precisely that error which the *moralitas* denounces.

According to the *moralitas*, the wisdom which the jasp represents is 'perfite prudence and cunning' (l.128), the ability to govern one's actions wisely through prudence, which, combining a knowledge of past, present, and future, shadows the eternal and comprehensive divine vision[26]. The mode of virtue recommended by the *moralitas* is thus one which emphasises moral action based on a sense of the comprehensiveness of the divine pattern and one's place within it. This same emphasis is highly pertinent to the interpretative problem posed by the fable, for it demands that in reading, as elsewhere, the priority in judgement should be given to one's own moral circumstances. But the conflict between the narrative and the *moralitas* and the desire to resolve it leads one to lose sight of this priority. By inviting a resolution in narrow hermeneutic terms it obstructs the perception that either of the suggested morals may be judged as valid if considered in terms of their utility for different readers.

'The Cock and the Jasp' thus operates in a manner similar to that proposed by E.S. Newlyn, where the pattern is one of interpretative error followed by the rectification of that error. But this is much more clearly motivated than Newlyn's article suggests, operating on a meta-textual level which directly addresses the morality of reading, and which is highly appropriate for the first fable of the collection. Henryson leads his audience into precisely that fault which he denounces in the *moralitas*, and in doing so comments on the general principles which should govern

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26. See Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, xlvii, 1, resp.

particular interpretative decisions. He reinforces the ethical emphasis of Scholastic literary theory by showing his audience the pertinence of his moral to their own lives, indeed, to their own attitudes to exegesis, forcefully illustrating the fact that reading should be accompanied by an active process of self-examination leading to penitence and moral reform.

Reading thus becomes focused not on the text but on the moral requirements of the world outside it: a world consisting of fallen beings of manifold conditions, all of whom must achieve a perspective on the perfect *ordo* within which they exist appropriate to their own position within it. This demands a pluralistic approach to reading in which a text yields up diverse levels of significance in order to address the varying moral needs of different people. In this, Henryson expresses both a sense of the necessary incompleteness of vision in a fallen world, where no single viewpoint can be taken as the final word for all purposes, and a sense that the limited significance which such vision furnishes is validated by its participation in a totality of Wisdom which is revealed in different aspects to different conditions of humanity. Thus, 'The Cock and the Jasp' concludes with an injunction to the audience: 'Ga seik the jasp, quha will, for thair it lay.' (l.161) Its precise location is left to them to determine, according to their own ethical requirements.

This aspect of the *Fables* is clearly very much in line with the strategies of Scholastic literary theory. In both there is a reduction of the determinative influence of textuality within a framework in which poetry mediates between an audience and a body of truth founded in an extra-textual reality. Both tolerate a wide range of readings organised within the broad constraints of Christian doctrine and defined with reference to a specific audience's moral condition. But it is important to note that in sanctioning this approach, those disruptive forces which Henryson so powerfully evokes in the act of reading always remain a constant threat, just as in the *moralitas* of 'The Trial of the Fox' temptation 'daylie sagis men of religiounis, / Cryand to thame, "Cum to the warld agane!"' (ll.1134-35). The 'thochtis vane' (l.1133) which daily besiege religious people are like the temptation to read in exclusive hermeneutic terms and so to reject one of the morally sound readings. The force of the desire to look back to the letter of the text and so to lose sight of the true basis and end of meaning is thus an immanent concern.

For Henryson, the danger that the understanding will become engrossed by the text in a manner which problematises the relation of meaning to prior truths is not something which is adequately countered by any self-erasing effect of fictionality, or which can be contained by a modifying interplay between simultaneously registered levels of meaning. Instead, Henryson greatly increases the reflexive references to the text's significative structure and to the reading process which are implicit in both of these conventional Scholastic approaches. In Henryson's work, a correct sense of the relation between poetic language and meaning can only be arrived at by first evoking, and then revealing as erroneous, an approach to interpretation wherein the determinative influence of the text exerts a powerful influence on reading. So incumbent is the risk of error on this level that it must constantly be recalled in order for a morally appropriate reading to be successfully attained.

Henryson's open engagement with the problems which poetry poses for any view which seeks to maintain the ideality of meaning suggests a much stronger and more explicit sense of the dangers of imaginative writing than was evident in his Scholastic precursors. The assured containment which they had established is replaced with a much more vigilant approach which clearly delineates the risks in order to supervise them more efficiently. Accordingly, as we see in 'The Cock and the Jasp', the emphasis on the positive value of poetry is qualified by the evoking of its potential hazards. Henryson's view of poetry as a conjunction of utility and threat thus appears as a modification of Scholastic literary theory: a modification which recognises a renewed impetus for poetic language to transgress the limits of its assigned instrumental function within such theory, and which seeks to counter this while preserving the essence of the Scholastic framework.

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The *Fables*, however, is a complex work encompassing a range of differing and vying attitudes. If many aspects of Henryson's manipulation of the narrative/*moralitas* structure continue the fundamental concerns and strategies of Scholastic literary theory, other aspects nevertheless suggest a more radical departure. Taking 'The Cock and the Jasp' as an example, I have sought to illustrate the extent to which it draws on the

fundamental Scholastic attitudes towards literature. Yet, given this, we are still left with that awkward stanza of ll.120-126, which poses some rather more difficult problems. The stanza is at odds with the general tenor of the *moralitas*, which describes the figural significance of the fable, rather than adding details to the narrative. Nor does it belong with the narrative section of the fable since the preceding stanza announces the intention to move on to the 'inward sentence and intent' of the fable (l.117).

This uncertainty is reflected in the manuscript tradition. The Bannatyne manuscript places the stanza in the *moralitas*, while the other manuscripts have it as the final stanza of the tale[27]. The stanza also seems incomplete and ill-conceived, announcing that the jewel has seven properties without clearly delineating these, and in fact only outlining five. Of these, protection from fire and accidents hardly seems to add anything to preservation from 'cacis perrillous'. Moreover, the praise of the colours of the jewel (l.121) seems rather lame, coming as it does only two stanzas after the cock's reasoned rejection of such frivolous concerns (ll.100-1). It is probably not a scribal interpolation, since it is stylistically and verbally Henrysonian. Denton Fox has remarked that 'it seems very possible that it is a fragment which Henryson intended to cancel or rewrite'[28]. No doubt. But it expresses a significant hesitation in the transition into the *moralitas*.

The stanza seeks to base its negative reading of the cock's actions on the literal sense of the narrative, asserting that he fails to recognise certain material benefits which the jasp could have for him. But that this assertion should be located after the narrative section has ended, poised awkwardly between it and the *moralitas*, suggests some discomfort with the *moralitas*' assessment of the fable, and implies a recognition of the greater validity of the cock's interpretation of events. It is as though at the moment of transition to a moralising exegesis the need is felt to make the moral correspond to the fictional details of the narrative by adding new information which will undermine the cock's perspective. These features of the stanza imply a dissatisfaction with the disparity between the tale's presentation of the cock and the figural reading offered in the rest of the *moralitas*.

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27. See Fox, ed., *Poems*, pp.197-98.
28. Ibid., p.198.

At the same time, the stanza's incomplete state and the uncertainty with which it is situated in the poem, belonging neither to the tale nor to the *moralitas* (which develops in an altogether different direction as it analyses the figural rather than magical and material significance of the stone), suggest a discomfort with this gesture of reconciliation between tale and *moralitas*. Thus, in this stanza, and at the decisive interpretative moment of the first fable, the poem hovers uncertainly between the desire to derive a reading which is consonant with the specific fictional framework of the narrative and a sense that interpretation should not be limited by such merely textual constraints.

This tension recurs in varying forms throughout the *Fables*. If Henryson seeks to reassert and bolster Scholastic attitudes towards the literary text, he also registers a sense that such attitudes are increasingly unsustainable and that other approaches to interpretation may be required. This sense is most notably manifested in those fables where the narrative and the *moralitas* not only differ, but actually appear to contradict each other. 'The Two Mice' is a good example of this. In the tale, there is a pathetic emphasis on the poverty of the country mouse, who 'in to the wynter tyde / Had hunger, cauld, and tholit grit distres' (ll.169-70). In the light of this her attempt to better her circumstances appears understandable and justified. The *moralitas*, however, sees this attempt as pure folly and from the mouse's example goes on to condemn 'wantoun man that vsis for to feid / Thy wambe, and makis it a god to be' (ll.381-2), recommending instead that one should sit by one's 'awin fyre, thocht it be bot ane gleid' (l.389), since 'Quha hes aneuch, of na mair hes he neid' (l.375).

This fable is one where E.H. Tolliver's view might provide a convincing account, seeing the sympathy/judgement dichotomy as contained within an ironic structure of attitudes which, comprehending both sides of the dichotomy, recognises both the necessity and limitations of each of them. This argument is strengthened by some of John MacQueen's observations on the fable. The statements that the country mouse lives 'as owtlawis dois' (l.168), and that her dwelling is 'Withoutin fyre or candill birnand bricht, / For commonly sic pykeris luffis not lycht' (ll.202-3), suggests that the mice have certain moral shortcomings. The cat's toying with the country mouse is recounted in terms which recall medieval descriptions of the wheel of Fortune: 'Fra fute to fute he kest hir

to and fra, / Quhylis vp, quhylis doun, als tait as ony kid' (ll.330-331). This brings to mind the Boethian emphasis that concern over earthly pleasure subjects one to the whims of fortune, which can only be escaped by placing one's happiness in God, implying that the country mouse makes precisely such an error. The lines 'Without God speid thair harbery wes tane' (l.101), and 'Withouttin grace thay wesche and went to meit' (l.107) further indicates the mice's lack of spiritual values in their concentration on material concerns. All these aspects of the fable can be seen to prepare us for the *moralitas*' judgement[29]. The tale could thus be argued to entail both a sympathy for the mice and an awareness of the limitations of their materialistic concerns which allows for a sense of the need for reform.

Further analysis seems to strengthen this reading. The moral flaws of the mice suggested by the elements of the tale noted by MacQueen are condemned in the *moralitas* in terms which attack the idolatry of materialism, and remind one of the instability of earthly pleasure:

> O wantoun man that vsis for to feid
> Thy wambe, and makis it a god to be;
> Luke to thy self, I warne the weill on deid.
> The cat cummis and to the mous hes ee;
> What is avale thy feist and royaltie,
> With dreidfull hart and tribulatioun?
> (ll.381-6)

John MacQueen points out that this passage recalls *Phillipians* 3, 8-19: 'For many walk, of whom I have told you [...], that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.'[30] One thinks also of the parable of the rich fool in *Luke* 12, 16-21. But the passage also recalls Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosphiae* in emphasising the instability of earthly pleasure (a point also made in the first stanza of the *moralitas*: 'As fitchis myngit ar with nobill seid, / Swa intermellit is aduersitie / With eirdlie joy, swa that na state is frie / Without trubill or sum vexatioun [...]' (ll.367-70)), and stressing that to place so much store by such pleasure as to seek more of it can only increase the uncertainty

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29. MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp.122-27.
30. Ibid. p.126.

and unhappiness of one's existence. Thus, in the *De Consolatione*, Dame Philosophy asserts that

> Anxia enim res est humanorum condicio bonorum et quae vel numquam perpetua subsistat. [...] Quam multis amaritudinibus humanae felicitatis dulcedo respersa est! Quae si etiam fruenti iucunda esse videatur, tamen quo minus cum velit abeat retineri non possit. Liquet igitur quam sit mortalium rerum misera beatitudo quae nec apud aequanimos perpetua perdurat nec anxios tota delectat. [...] Manifestum est quoniam ad beatitudinem percipiendem fortunae instabilitas adspirare non possit.[31]

The concomitant futility and self-defeating nature of the quest for material happiness is later expanded on in terms most pertinent to 'The Two Mice':

> Quid autem tanto fortunae strepitu desiseratis? Fugare credo indigentiam copia quaeritis. Atqui hoc vobis in contrarium cedit. Pluribus quippe adminiculis opus est ad tuendam pretiosae supellectilis varietatem, verumque illud est permultis eos indigere qui abundantiam suam naturae necessitate non ambitus superfluitate metiantur.
>
> (Ibid., Bk II, Prose v, p.204)

The Boethian nature of the moral is also indicated by the final stanza of the tale which tells of the country mouse's return to her home:

> [...] I hard say scho passit to hir den,
> Als warme as woll, suppose it wes not greit,
> Full beinly stuffit, baith but and ben,
> Off peis and nuttis, beinis ry, and quheit;
> Quhen euer scho list scho had aneuch to eit,
> In quyet and eis withoutin ony dreid [...].
>
> (ll.358-63)

This shift from feelings of hardship to a sense of satisfaction in sufficiency suggests a change in perspective both on the mouse's part and on that of the narrator. The priorities have changed from the mouse valuing the increase of material pleasure as a means to happiness and the narrator sympathising with and apparently supporting her aspirations, to both recognising that this only leads to more unhappiness. To reject the attractions of wealth and make do with a sufficiency, small though it may be, produces a security which the instability of earthly goods cannot. This change of priorities recalls Boethius' argument that while the ultimate end desired by all is the good, those who seek it in material

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31. Boethius, *Tractates; De Consolatione Philosophiae*, tr. H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand, S.J. Tester (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), II, iv, pp.192-96.

things have mistakenly identified this final good which is only found in God, and thus thwart their own desire. Hence Boethius can state that despite any material prosperity which may come to the wicked, evil is its own punishment:

> [...] veramque illam Platonis esse sententiam liquet solos quod desiderent facere posse sapientes, improbos vero exercere quidem quod libeat, quod vero desiderent explere non posse. Faciunt enim quaelibet, dum per ea quibus delectantur id bonum quod desiderant se adepturos putant; sed minime adipiscuntur, quoniam ad beatidudinem probra non veniunt.
>
> (*De Cons.*, Bk IV, Prose ii, p.328)

The mouse discovers that happiness does not lie where she had sought it, and that she was mistaken not to have found it in her original condition.

The narrator's earlier description of the misery of the country mouse's life, with the sympathy for her aspirations which its emphasis on her hardship implies, thus appears to express support for a perception of her condition which turns out to be erroneous in the light of the tale's outcome. But this need not necessarily suggest that the narrator's initial sympathetic view is simply wrong or that he holds two heterogeneous views: if the mouse's dissatisfaction with her poor condition is wrong, the sympathy with which that dissatisfaction is viewed is not obviated. The fact that the mouse cannot put her poor condition in a proper perspective until she can compare it with direct experience of a wealthy life makes her error seem almost unavoidable. The *moralitas*' condemnation of her actions is thus offset by an awareness in the narrative that they stem from an ignorance produced by the constraints on her knowledge, rather than from vice. Given this consideration, the sympathetic view of the mouse's aspirations is necessary if one is to take account of the difficulty involved in acting morally when guided by the weak vision available in a fallen world. It is thus an appropriate counterpoise and complement to the judgemental emphasis on the need for moral reform. This balance produces a moral fable which both stresses the urgency of such reform and alerts its audience to the need for extreme discernment in the face of obstacles which could mislead even the most well-intentioned.

This reading would accord with Tolliver's view that apparently conflicting perspectives are harmonised through Henryson's ironic manipulation of the fable structure. But satisfying as such a reading appears, the fable is in fact more complex than it suggests. The final

stanza which tells of the mouse's new-found contentment is reported indirectly, with the narrator disclaiming any direct knowledge of her fate upon leaving the town:

> Quhen scho wes furth and fre scho wes full fane,
> And merilie markit vnto the mure;
> I cannot tell how eftirwart scho fure,
> But I hard say scho passit to hir den [...].
> (ll.355-58)

By assigning it the status of hearsay, as opposed to the direct reporting of the rest of the tale, Henryson distances us from the only part of the narrative which supports the *moralitas*' assertion that the happiest life is 'sickernes, with small possessioun' (l.380), making us much less certain of the validity of its apparently neat resolution of the story. Furthermore, the close juxtaposition of the mouse's leaving town 'full fane' and 'merilie' with the statement 'I cannot tell how eftirwart scho fure' raises the possibility that her merriness may not have continued for long. In suggesting that the mouse's misery may continue despite what she has learned from her experience, these aspects of the tale indicate that the sense of hunger and distress which motivates her actions is more than merely a materialistic delusion. Rather, the dismissal of such concerns as being merely delusory appears as narrow and reductive, failing to understand or engage with significant aspects of reality.

Rather than harmoniously comprehending different views of the mouse, then, the fable embodies two judgemental perspectives which sit much less easily together. The *moralitas* roundly condemns the mouse's attempt to better her circumstances, couching its execration in terms that identify the desire for material good with a disruption of moral order in which the pleasures of the world usurp the position due to God: 'wantoun man that vsis for to feid / Thy wambe, and makis it a god to be' (ll.381-2). In this the *moralitas* constructs the significance of the mouse's actions in relation to a fixed moral system wherein the pursuit of material pleasure is condemned *a priori*. The elements of the tale which challenge the *moralitas*' assessment of the mouse suggest that such privileging of *a priori* values as the prime determinant of moral judgement is reductive, failing to take account of the complexities which attend human actions in their particular temporal settings. In this, the tale invites a more flexible vision in which judgement is not merely balanced with a sympathetic attention to the temporal circumstances which circumscribe moral

actions, but is actually tempered with and shaped by the consideration of such factors. Rather than existing in a complementary relationship, these perspectives tend to displace one other, as the differing priorities of each make the other's perspective unsustainable. If one wishes to support the *moralitas* in maintaining the precepts of the moral law as the key criterion of judgement, one must abandon the tale's focus on those material considerations which invite a different assessment. If one wishes to endorse the tale's sympathetic attention to the circumstances which constrain the mouse's perceptions and actions, one must abandon the *moralitas*' focus on ideal moral principles, as the tale denies these any evaluative power in application to actual situations.

This of course states the opposition between the two parts of the fable too boldly. The differing attitudes are interfused and in tension throughout. The *moralitas*' insistence that 'Of eirdly ioy it beiris maist degre, / Blythines in hart, with small possessioun' (ll.395-96) suggests a desire to comfortably harmonise a conformity to absolute values with the material outcome of such conformity. Simple harmony of this sort, however, is not forthcoming from such an ethical system. Boethius, for instance, argues that virtue is its own reward and that despite any misery which may befall, a person achieves happiness in simply being good: 'Sicut igitur probis probitas ipsa fit praemium, ita improbis nequitia ipsa supplicium est.' (*De Cons.*, Bk IV, Prose iii, p.333). Happiness is thus seen to lie in spiritual disposition, regardless of material circumstance. Furthermore, when addressing the effects of material fortune on the good and the bad he has Dame Philosophy state that 'Omnem [...] bonam prorsus esse fortunam' (Bk IV, Prose vii, p.374) and argues from mystery and faith to justify this:

> [...] neque enim fas est homini cunctas divinae operae machinas vel ingenio comprehendere vel explicare sermone. Hoc tantum perspexisse sufficiat, quod naturarum omnium proditor deus idem ad bonum dirigens cuncta disponat [...].
>
> (Bk IV, Prose vi, p.370)

All things are seen to tend towards the good as parts of the divine plan, and even those things which lead to material misery are good in terms of this *ordo*, albeit in ways which we may not understand.

In thus defining the good in terms of a spiritual *telos*, Boethius effectively discounts consideration of material circumstance from any essential role in ethical judgement. Earthly misery is to be accepted as

ultimately tending towards a realisation of a transcendent spiritual happiness. This set of ethical priorities is the same as that interrogated by Chaucer in *The Clerk's Tale*, where Griselda's complete embodiment of the abstract virtue of patience risks permitting her husband to harm others uncontested. Her virtue is one which takes no account of its material consequences, but which is simply defined in terms of its consonance with an ideal value[32]. Henryson's *moralitas*, however, in so pointedly ignoring the possibility that the country mouse's virtue may lead to continued unhappiness, appears unable to countenance such disconsonance between abstract virtue and material effect. In this, even as the *moralitas* affirms its moral stance, it simultaneously implies a discomfort with the possible consequences of its unyielding nature.

The tale shows a similar complexity of viewpoint. The references to the lax praying habits of the mice, and the description of them as 'pykeris' who 'luffis not lycht' (l.203) (recalling *John* 3:20, 'For every one that doth evil hateth the light'), imply a sense of their immorality and need for reform, even as the other aspects of the tale mentioned above express a dissatisfaction with any simple moralising judgement of their actions. The fable as a whole thus expresses an anxiety, caught as it is between a sense of the urgent need for moral reform (the urgency being emphasised by the imminent threat of death represented by the cat), and a discontent with the mode and criteria of judgement according to which such reform is to be achieved.

With regard to Henryson's manipulation of the tale/*moralitas* relation, it is clear that the structure is more complex than suggested in those accounts in which the two sections are made to neatly embody different attitudes, be they sympathy and judgement, or error and truth. Here, while the conflict of moral attitudes is made most apparent through the different emphases of tale and *moralitas*, a close analysis reveals that these attitudes are much more closely intertwined, with the tension between them implicit in both parts of the fable. This highlights the fact that one should be careful of resolving these tensions too easily, whether it be by privileging tale or *moralitas*, or by seeking to harmonise them. The intermingled nature of the different attitudes suggests that the relationship between them is much more unsettled than even in Tolliver's

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32. Chaucer, *The Clerk's Tale*, *CT*, IV, 57-1212, (pp.138-53).

view, where different attitudes are seen to coexist as alternative perspectives which indicate each other's inadequacy as a total viewpoint, while nevertheless remaining adequate in their own way. The close intertwining of the sympathetic and judgemental perspectives means that neither one is ever asserted without the other threatening to displace it. Far from being harmonised within a framework which delimits a different valid ground for each of them, the differing attitudes encroach forcefully on each other's territory. This ultimately leaves an impression of doubt over the validity of either, rather than the sense of the relative adequacy of each which is essential to Tolliver's argument.

The nature of the moral tensions expressed in 'The Two Mice' is highly pertinent to Henryson's attitudes towards literary exegesis. We have already seen in 'The Cock and the Jasp' how Henryson draws a relation between the act of reading and the virtue of prudence. Prudence involves the intellectual comprehension of past, present and future so as to assimilate them to a singular moral essence and comprehend the resonances of specific actions within the frame of universal ethical principles. Thus, in the words of Aquinas, among the moral virtues 'prudentia est simpliciter principalior omnibus' (*ST*, II-I, q.61, art.2, obj.1), as it is the means by which an abstract moral idea can be most fully actualised, and the particular raised to the level of the universal. This valorisation of prudence tends, as in Boethius' thought, to locate the ultimate ground of ethical judgement in *a priori* principles. 'The Two Mice', in presenting a crisis of moral epistemology initiated by a sense of the lack of correlation between the universal and particular dimensions of reality, thus also presents a crisis of literary signification and interpretation. The uncertainty and indirectness which characterises the relation between individual things and universal natures severly impedes the capacity of the literary text to maintain the ideality of its reference while effectively relating meaning to actual circumstances. The interpretative tensions in the fable are thus structured by Henryson's attempts to find a mode of representation which can fulfil both of the requirements laid down by Scholastic literary theory in a context where the two are no longer necessarily compatible.

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The strength of the privilege afforded to moral quiddities in medieval ethics, and, by extension, in medieval literary theory, is clear from its presence in the thought of Aquinas. In his ethical writings Aquinas assigns the consideration of the particularising elements of an action an important place in moral judgement:

> In actione humana bonitas quadruplex considerari potest. Una quidem secundum genus, prout scilicet est actio, quia quantum habet de actione et entitate tantum habet de bonitate [...]. Alia vero secundum speciem, quia accepitur secundum obiectum conveniens. Tertia secundum circumstantias, quasi secundum accidentia quaedam. Quarta autem secundum finem, quasi secundum habitudinem ad bonitas causam.
>
> (*ST*, II-I, q.xviii, art.4, resp.)

I presume that by the genus of an act Aquinas here means its classification as either evil or virtue, while species certainly refers to the precise category of vice or virtue under which the act falls: ie., evil is the genus of the species theft, just as animal is the genus of the species man[33]. The 'obiectum' (object) of which he speaks specifies the kind of action being carried out, such as taking another's property, which places the action in the species of theft and therefore in the general category of evil (ibid., art.2, resp.). The end of an action is, quite simply, the purpose for which it is carried out (ibid., art.4). The circumstances seem to be the particularities of its context, so that while to take another's property implies a general object which is classified within the species of theft, the fact that the property belongs not just to someone else, but to a specific person falls under a consideration of circumstances (ibid., art.10, resp.). Aquinas' sense of the importance of the particular context of an action is indicated by his assertion that in order for an act to be absolutely good it is necessary that it be good in all four ways (ibid., art.4, resp.).

Furthermore, this schema allows for a complex interplay of these different areas so as to permit different modifications of ethical judgement. Aquinas cites the example of someone committing theft in order to give to the poor (ibid., obj.3), thus making the act evil with

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33. Aquinas himself is not very clear on this point. He never expressly states exactly what he considers as the genus of an act, and while in the passage just cited he distinguishes it from species, elsewhere he uses it as a synonym for species (eg. *ST*, II-I, q.18, art.2, resp.).

regard to its object and good with regard to its end. In assessing this case he argues that 'nihil prohibet actioni habenti unam praedictarum bonitatum deesse aliam' (ibid., ad.3). While deficiency in any one area is enough to classify an act as evil, since evil is seen as a deficiency in goodness (ibid., art.1, resp.), it is so to a lesser degree than an act which is lacking in more than one of these areas. It seems then that the intended end of an act can ameliorate an action.

In his discussion of circumstances Aquinas also argues that these have an important role in the assessment of the goodness or evil of an act, citing two ways in which they are significant. The first of these is that circumstances affect the determination of the species of the act (ibid., art.10). For example, when someone takes another's property the fact that this property belongs to one particular person and not another places the act in the category of theft, even though the fact is wholly contingent (ibid., resp.). To expand a little: for Aquinas, the principle of property is in accord with universal reason (ibid.). But while this means that possession always has a universal element to it, the fact that a specific person should own a particular thing is in itself circumstantial. Yet it can be a fundamental consideration in moral judgement.

Secondly, Aquinas argues that consideration of circumstance can aggravate or diminish the goodness or evil of an act without affecting its species. Thus, in a theft the amount stolen has no effect on the classification of the act as theft, but does reflect on the evil of the act and the amount of blame apportioned (ibid., art.11). In both of these instances, Aquinas' careful consideration of particular circumstances is typical of the general tendency of his thought, which preserves the priority of the absolute while maintaining a flexibility which can encompass the manifold conditions of secular life. The same tendency is observable in Alexander of Hales' view of the Bible as employing diverse *modi* or styles in order to make the one truth accessible to people of different conditions to whom it manifests itself in different ways.

But it is important to note that just as Alexander's appreciation of stylistic variation in the Bible is ultimately founded on a sense of a singular truth which ultimately transcends its different textual formulations and retains its governance of their meanings, so too Aquinas considers the particularising elements of moral actions as having a definitive or modificatory rather than determinative role in shaping the

significance of human actions. Hence, an act's attending circumstances and its end are never the originating cause of its evil or virtue. Circumstances may influence the relation between a given action and its universal species, altering its degree of virtue, or placing it under one category of good or evil rather than another. But it is these prior categories, established in accordance with the dictates of the natural law, which are the prime determinant of the value attached to human actions[34]. The same holds true for the end. The ameliorative effect of a good intended end on an action which is evil with regard to its object is ascribed to the fact that this end places the act under another moral species (in the above instance charity) in addition to that of theft[35]. Again, it is only in terms of its resonance within this prior category that the virtue or evil of the act is determined. Furthermore, Aquinas' assertion that a deficiency of good in one of the four areas he takes into consideration is sufficient to classify an act as evil also implies this same privileging of moral essences. It indicates that the classification ultimately depends on the relation of an act to virtue as its genus. Its relation to the prior category is the sole determinant of the judgement as to whether it is good or evil. The particularising elements which circumscribe the individual action can only define or modify the act's relation to such categories. Thus, theft is judged as wicked not because of its effect on the victim but because, as a breach of the universal principle of property, 'repugnat rationi' (q.18, art.11, resp.). In short, whether an act be judged good or evil is wholly determined by its relation to prior ethical categories defined by a universal order of reason.

Prudence, then, is the central moral virtue precisely because it is the means of clearly perceiving this relation, drawing past, present, and future (prior example, immediate circumstances, and ensuing consequences) together to reveal an act's singular moral essence and ultimately enabling the assimilation of the particular to the universal. The same structure operates in the Scholastic approach to reading, where the text mediates between its audience and a morally appropriate *sententia*, allowing the readers to fix this *sententia* in their memory and

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34. See *ST*, I-II, xciv, 3, resp.
35. On the possibility of an act having diverse species see *ST*, II-I, xviii, vii.

assimilate it to their present conditions, from where it can serve as a guide for future action[36].

'The Two Mice', however, problematises the privileging of ideal values in a way which disrupts the operation of prudence both in its ethical and in its literary modes, the two of which are here so closely intertwined as to be inseparable. The prudential mode of moral judgement which assimilates the particular to the universal is also a mode of textual exposition, and the fable's dissatisfaction with idealising moral judgement thus also applies to idealising exegesis. Both are seen to involve a privileging of universal values which leaves them unable to address those significant material dimensions of the country mouse's actions which, if not exactly vindicating them, at least preclude any simple assessment of them as right or wrong. In this respect, the problems which the poem raises about the lack of congruence between the exigencies of particular existence and the dictates of universal laws exceed even the capacity of an ethical system as flexible as that of Aquinas. Aquinas could certainly allow for the mouse's circumstances as ameliorating her actions and minimising the condemnation to which they are subject. But in the fable the circumstances actually challenge the classification of those actions as evil. In foregrounding the exclusions on which the *moralitas* bases its judgement, the fable suggests that the *a priori* categorisation by which her behaviour is evaluated as wicked ultimately fails to give an adequate account of those aspects of secular life which give legitimacy to her actions and which lead one to rebut any negative judgement on them.

This ethical problem ultimately reflects upon the moral utility of Scholastic exegesis. In the *moralitas* of the fable the poor are directly addressed as the audience towards whom the moral is directed: 'Thy awin fyre, freind, thocht it be bot ane gleid, / It warmis weill, and is worth gold to the [...].' In this the fable declares its aim of addressing the circumstances of a particular audience, in accordance with the affective requirement of Scholastic literary theory. The *moralitas* claims a universal application which is as relevant to the lives of the real poor as it is to that of the mouse in the fable. But the tale's foregrounding of the

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36. See, for instance Barbour's *Bruce*, XX, 621-30, (Vol.III) where the poem is presented as putting the example of the great men of the past in memory for present readers in order to raise their future conduct once more to this superlative level.

exclusions which the *moralitas* must make in order not to compromise the authority of its judgement places the legitimacy of this claim of relevance in serious doubt.

In this, the fable's critique of the weak particular application of the *moralitas*' perspective demonstrates the extent to which the increasing sense of disparity between universals and particulars in the later Middle Ages has exacerbated the tension between the idealising and affective aspects of Scholastic literary theory. The *moralitas*' exclusion of significant dimensions of the life of the poor, its counting as illusory urgent material concerns which the tale suggests to be all too real, is an instance of bad *judgement*. Judgement here is used in its rhetorical sense where it designates a clear discernment of the nature and needs of the particular audience being addressed so as to properly orientate what is being said towards them[37]. Since a stress on the ethical function of literature as addressing itself to the lives of specific audiences in order to incline them towards virtuous action is essential to Scholastic literary theory, the *moralitas* is being indicted according to criteria laid down by the affective axis of that theory. Moreover, the *moralitas*' failure to adequately relate its *sententia* to the actual circumstances which it seeks to address is directly associated with the incapacity of an *a priori* ethics to adequately address the problems of contingent existence. The *moralitas*' privileging of simple universal precepts as its criteria of judgement means that it is incapable of attending to the ways in which actions take on significances in the here and now which are independent and divergent from any absolute qualities which might be attached to them, and which may tend, indeed, to rebut the ascription of such qualities. In effect, the idealising priority of Scholastic literary theory is actually being challenged in this fable in terms derived from that same theory, being viewed as an obstacle to the proper fulfilment of its affective imperative.

It seems, then, that what is required is a mode of poetic signification which, rather than prioritising the universal over the particular, will more directly invoke the contingent complexities of actual circumstances and relate meaning more closely to them. That Henryson does indeed move towards such a mode is implied in the parallel drawn in

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37. See Ake Bergvall, *The Enabling of Judgement* (Uppsala: University of Upsalla Press, 1989), p.29.

'The Two Mice' between the lives of the audience and that of the country mouse, each having a greater complexity than the *moralitas* allows. The parallel complexity suggests the possibility of a mode of writing and of exegesis which, rather than assessing actions or beliefs in terms of their absolute resonance within a static system of values, will instead examine their significance within a dynamic network of particular relationships established on the level of plot. The implication is that this dynamism is a more accurate reflection of the complexity of actual life and can more fully account for the resonances which actions accrue in their temporal contexts, the importance of which the allegorical and exemplative modes tend to exclude or minimise. In ethical terms, this literary mode usurps the privilege of an ideal moral essence as the main criterion of judgement. It instead prioritises the particular ramifications of different actions and beliefs, looking to local context rather than eternal verities as the arbiter of meaning.

But while the tensions in 'The Two Mice' suggest that such a mode is attractive to Henryson, the fable also suggests a strong discomfort with its more particularising emphasis. This is most obviously indicated by those elements of the tale which, in suggesting a sense of the moral shortcomings of the mice, anticipate the view of the *moralitas* and express a need for its perspective. But the discomfort is manifested even in those aspects of the tale which undermine the *moralitas*' viewpoint. I have already observed that in foregrounding in its final stanzas the contrived nature of the conclusion and the possibilities excluded by the *moralitas*, the tale precludes any simple judgement on the country mouse's action without exactly vindicating it. If the mouse continues unhappy in her poor condition, as the final stanzas suggest she may well do, then her dissatisfaction cannot be condemned as a false perspective. Her misery appears irreducible, despite the awareness that wealth brings its own discomforts.

But this same awareness of the problems of wealth means that one cannot praise her action either. The hardships which have to be endured are presented as a universal quality of existence. The town mouse is prepared to tolerate the danger presented by the cat in order to have plenty, while the country mouse finds the tribulations of poverty less debilitating. The tale's close consideration of the circumstances which circumscribe the mice's actions, in displacing any absolute bases of

judgement, means that there are no stable terms whereby these choices can be seen as meaningful. The significance of an action or belief can only be assessed on pragmatic grounds, according to a particular set of interests: the town mouse and the country mouse can each consider their own choices the wisest. In both cases the judgement is based not on any essential quality inherent in their actions or convictions but only in their perceptions of where their own best interests lie. Both their choices seem equally legitimate and equally meaningless.

In this we see Henryson's difficulty with literalistic interpretations which makes the text the arbiter of meaning. The prioritisation of the details of the poetic text foregrounds the fact that whatever meaning is drawn from it is contingently constructed, rather than given. This certainly has the virtue of allowing meaning to be closely related to the circumstances for which it declares itself valid. But divorced from any stable authorising centre it will also appear merely as the product of a particular viewpoint, predicated only on pragmatic grounds which reflect a set of interests at stake in the circumstances in question, and bearing no relation to any stable truth which transcends them. The subjection of literary signification to the constraints of the letter produces the same disruption of authority as is effected in the field of ethical judgement by the prioritisation of local circumstance, undermining any sense of a stable ground which can validate meaning. Thus the implications of the tale in this fable lead to what seems to appear to Henryson as a rather nihilistic relativism, indicated in the futility of the choices open to the mice. The literalistic mode of reading which the tale demands as a counter to the *moralitas*' transcendence of its particularising details localises meaning to a degree which leaves no fixed position for judgement. Accordingly, no assessment of the depicted events can be seen as more than a fundamentally arbitrary construction of them: in place of the *moralitas*' unbending conviction the tale is only able to offer a negative gesture of despair.

In this respect, 'The Two Mice' calls into question the diffraction of unified meaning which the affective emphasis of Scholastic literary theory demands if the varying contingencies of diverse circumstances are to be adequately addressed. Henryson expresses a concern that an overly close relation of *sententia* to circumstance deprives meaning not only of any universal basis and normative application, but also of any

substantial relation to *particular* realities, whose lack of inherent value infects all judgements that are predicated of them with an enervating arbitrariness. In this, the fable reaffirms a sense that the *moralitas*' idealising mode of judgement is indispensable if our actions and beliefs are to be valued as anything more than a facade raised against the underlying futility and emptiness of existence[38].

The issues raised in 'The Two Mice' cast light on the modification of Scholastic literary theory which appears in 'The Cock and the Jasp' and 'The Trial of the Fox'. The sense in these fables of the strong temptation exerted by the poetic text, which leads to their increased vigilance as to the dangers of poetry, is symptomatic of a sense that Scholastic exegesis inadequately addresses the problems of its audience. This sense of inadequacy leads to a desire for an alternative mode of representation and reading which can more fully encompass and address the complex particulars of worldly life. But this desire is offset by an awareness of the destabilisation of meaning which this desired mode produces. This leads to a reassertion of traditional Scholastic protocols in a form acutely sensitive to such temptations, and which aims to reassert strongly the relevance of these interpretative procedures to the particular moral circumstances of its audience. But the final stanza of the narrative section of 'The Cock and the Jasp', in embodying both a desire to draw a relation of consonance between text and interpretation and a discomfort with that desire, suggests the tenacity of the contrary impulse and implies a hesitation as to the adequacy of either course.

The aspects of the disjunctive patterning of the *Fables* which have been discussed above demonstrate the extent to which the late-medieval sense of the incommensurability of universals and particulars throws the Scholastic model of literature into crisis. The tensions and discontinuities which characterise the relation between the letter of the text and the *moralitas* are far from the unremarkable deployment of familiar conventions which Phillipa Bright argues them to be. Rather, they are symptomatic of a general breach between the simple imperatives of a universal moral order and the complexities of contingent existence

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38. See Steven R. McKenna, 'The Consolation of Myth in Henryson's *Fables*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 26 (1991), 490-502. McKenna argues that the *Fables* expresses a strong sense of existential crisis in the tales which leads to the *moralitates*' assertion of moral law to maintain some sense of an order in life.

which casts the idealising and affective axes of Scholastic literary theory into a relationship of antagonism. This effectively undermines the capacity of Scholasticism's idealising heuristic interpretative method to achieve the ethical end which is set for it.

Henryson's deep committment to the Scholastic vision of literature thus actually prevents him from unproblematically deploying its conventional interpretative protocols and models of signification: these are no longer felt to be adequate to fulfil the twin imperatives of Scholasticism which Henryson takes so seriously. The mutual destabilisation which is effected by the interference between the universalising and particularising perspectives of 'The Two Mice' demonstrates the disruptive effect of the resultant crisis of representation. The understanding is left poised uncertainly between two mutually incompatible perspectives, both of which yield up images of reality whose reference is oblique and whose evaluatory authority is inadequate. The fable thus testifies to the urgent necessity and extreme difficulty of finding a mode of representation which can bridge the gap between them. The necessity of this project spurns Henryson to experiment, developing alternative modes of signification and subjecting the traditional resources of Scholastic literary theory to modification; the difficulty prevents him from settling on any one mode of signification as being able to retain the authority of the absolute while still being able to address the complexities of temporal existence.

In the next chapter I shall examine the ways in which Henryson, in attempting to resolve the problems which he faces, inaugurates new perceptions of authorship and of literary signification. While, as we shall see, the concepts which he develops are often considered characteristic of the thought of later periods, and frequently conceived as being opposed to Scholastic values, an analysis of their function in Henryson's work will show that they do not simply emerge as a reaction to Scholasticism. Rather, they appear in Henryson's work as part of a modification of Scholastic thought on literature, and have a different set of resonances within Scholasticism from that which they have when utilised in later contexts. Henryson's treatment of the concept of authorship provides a powerful starting point for a more general analysis of the literary attitudes emerging in his work, serving as a focal point where all the

fundamental issues converge. It is thus to Henryson's treatment of authorship and authority that I now turn.

Chapter Four

Fen3eit of the New: Henryson, Authorship and *Auctoritas*

For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere.
(Chaucer, *Parliament of Fowls*, ll.22-5)[1]

1

Walter Map's *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum*, written in the late twelfth century, commanded considerable respect in its time. So much respect, in fact, that many of Map's contemporaries refused to believe that he had written it, instead ascribing it to the first century Roman historian, Valerius Maximus. Map remarked trenchantly, 'Hoc solum deliqui, quod uiuo. Verumptamen hoc morte mea corrigere consilium non habeo.'[2] As Alistair Minnis has observed, Map's situation reflects the common medieval perception that 'the only good author was a dead one.' (*Authorship*, p.12) The achievements of the ancients were considered to far greater than anything of which a modern writer might be capable. If the moderns had greater knowledge it was only because they were dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, adding what they could gain from their own small efforts to the great store of learning which they inherited from the ancient *auctores*. Thus, claiming no merit in themselves, medieval writers often tend to defer to the *auctoritas* of previous writers, in a simultaneously self-effacing and self-justifying gesture[3].

In many respects Henryson's treatment of Aesop in the *Fables* seems to assent to this view of authorship and *auctoritas*. Aesop is often referred to with a self-effacing deference. Phrases such as 'Esope, myne author makis mentioun' (l.162), and 'Esope, that nobill clerk, / Ane poet worthie to be lawreate [...] this foirsaid fabill wrate' (ll.1888-91) imply a continuity between Henryson's work and the writings of his *auctor*. This tends to devolve responsibility for the composition of the fables, and for

1. *The Parliament of Fowls*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, pp.385-94 (p.385).
2. Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. and trans. M.R. James; rev. C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), IV, v, p.312.
3. See above, Ch.1, pp.18-19.

the moral wisdom which they contain, away from Henryson and onto Aesop. In 'The Lion and the Mouse', Aesop in fact appears in a dream to personally relate the tale and expound a moral on it. This seems to conjoin with the other references to Aesop in the *Fables* in presenting the ancient poet as the true source of the work's *auctoritas*.

Yet the treatment of authorship in 'The Lion and the Mouse' is in fact more complex than this. The fable displays not an uncritical assent to and application of traditional views of authorship, but a significant departure from them. 'The Lion and the Mouse' forms part of a rethinking of the nature of authorship which is continued in other of the fables and in *The Testament of Cresseid*. In the rest of this chapter I shall analyse the ways in which Henryson departs from traditional concepts of *auctoritas*, examining the diverse views of authorship which appear in the *Fables* and in the *Testament*. The innovations which appear in Henryson's work reflect a dissatisfaction with the traditional medieval view of authorship and its associated interpretative modes, and in certain respects seem closer to Renaissance humanist literary attitudes. It will nevertheless be seen that the underlying premises of Henryson's innovations are very different from those of Renaissance humanism. The theoretical attitudes implicit in Henryson's work will be shown to result from a modification of Scholastic thought which maintains its central preoccupations.

2

Despite the frequent self-effacing references to Aesop in the *Fables*, the contribution of the translator/narrator to the fables' composition is in many places foregrounded. In 'The Cock and the Fox', the narrator announces that 'I purpois for to wryte / Ane cais I fand quhilk fell this ather 3eir / Betwix a fox and gentill Chantecleir.' (ll.408-10) As in all of Henryson's Reynardian fables, no mention is made of Aesop as the originator of the story, and the claim to be reporting real events is obviously a joke. The fact that the story is the invention of the narrator is thus clearly indicated. Indeed, the evidently absurd nature of the narrator's claim merely to be reporting events in a story which he himself has invented may invite a suspicion of all such attempts to disclaim authorial responsibility. In 'The Preiching of the Swallow', the narrator

(who in the previous fable of 'The Lion and the Mouse' has clearly been identified as the translator rather than Aesop), is projected into the fable as a witness to its action. This belies his claim in the *moralitas* that 'Esope, that nobill clerk [...], this foirsaid fabill wrate', instead indicating that the fable has been substantially transformed by the vernacular writer's exercise of his own literary powers. In 'The Sheep and the Dog', having ascribed the fable to Aesop (l.1146), the narrator personally encounters the sheep in the *moralitas* and overhears its complaint, once more foregrounding the modern writer's active construction of the fictional world of the fables.

This aspect of the treatment of authorial role in the *Fables* appears as early as the 'Prologue', in the modesty topos:

> In hamelie language and in termes rude
> Me neidis wryte, for quhy of eloquence
> Nor rhetorike, I never vnderstude.
> Tharfoir meiklie I pray *3*our reverence,
> Gif ye find ocht that throw my negligence
> Be deminute, or *3*it superfluous,
> Correct it at *3*our willis gratious.
>
> (ll.29-42)

This stanza is significant when considered in relation to the narrator's transference of responsibility for the *auctoritas* of the *Fables* from himself to Aesop. As John MacQueen has pointed out, the disclaimer of rhetorical skill is itself a rhetorical device, recommended in texts such as the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*[4]. In thus indicating the presence of rhetorical expertise in the very denial of any such skill, the passage suggests that one should be suspicious of these disclaimers, since this writer seems most active where he least claims to be. Furthermore, the emphasis on the risk of failure in the passage draws attention to the fallibility of the translator and the possibility that he may transform the source text through his own literary activity. The stress on the positive connection between the *Fables* and its authoritative original is in this way once again undermined by the implication that the texts upon which the *moralitates* build their interpretations cannot simply be ascribed to Aesop as the guarantor of their *auctoritas*, but may contain elements newly produced by the modern writer. From being an immediate presence behind the text, the *auctoritas* of Aesop recedes into the distance. The indications in the 'Prologue' that the narrator does not passively translate

4. MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, p.99.

but actively transforms his alleged source thus combine with the foregrounding of his literary creativity in the fables proper to suggest that the self-effacing ascription of the work to Aesop is itself a fiction of the modern author.

In 'The Lion and the Mouse', the meeting between Aesop and the narrator reinforces this suggestion. Aesop appears in a dream-vision, which by the mid-fifteenth century was a highly familiar and conventional literary form, whose artificial and stylised nature was increasingly evident[5]. Hence, rather than being seen as an authentic vision, Aesop's manifestation appears as the product of Henryson's poetic art, evoked in the exercise of well-established fictional conventions. Furthermore, by having Aesop appear as a fictional character within a work imputed to him, and having him address the fifteenth-century translator of that work, the fictionality of the supposed source and the independence of the modern writer are emphasised. If Aesop's presence gives this fable a particularly authoritative tone (appropriately, since of all the fables it is the only one which shows the behaviour of the characters in the tale to be in harmony with the values of the *moralitas*), this authority is nevertheless seen to be ultimately derived from the modern vernacular writer rather than the ancient Latin one.

The conclusion of the fable in fact has Aesop handing responsibility for future moral compositions to his supposed translator:

> 'My fair child,
> Perswaid the kirkmen ythandly to pray,
> That tressoun of this cuntrie be exyld,
> And iustice regne, and lordis keip thar fay
> Vnto thair souerane lord baith nycht and day.'
> (ll.1615-19)

Aesop is invoked as a figure of authority in order to hand over the laurels, requiring the modern author to continue the work of ethical persuasion. But this Aesop is also already clearly a part of the modern author's fiction. Henryson thus asserts both his community with and independence from Aesop in an act of self-authorisation, presenting the vernacular poet as continuing in his own work the project of the classical *auctor*. This combines with the foregrounding of the narrator's presence

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5. See A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), esp. his comments on Dunbar, pp.192-97.

elsewhere in the *Fables* to suggest that the modern author can himself claim the *auctoritas* previously afforded only to the ancients[6].

In this, Henryson parallels the developments in late-medieval thought observable in the attitudes of Guido da Pisa and Pietro Alighieri towards Dante, and which would be taken up in Renaissance humanism, where the modern author was being assigned a new dignity, and placed on an equal footing with the ancients. The precise nature and implications of the *auctoritas* being claimed by Henryson, however, remain to be seen.

3

In the previous chapter it was argued that two distinct views of literary signification are present in Henryson's work. The first and more traditional view is exemplified in 'The Cock and the Jasp', where the text is seen as inscribed within a broad framework of meaning which authorises a vast number of possible significations, the criteria by which these are judged as legitimate being their conformity with Christian doctrine and their ethical utility for given readers. The second, more innovative, view emerges in 'The Two Mice' and in the hesitation which appears in the transition from narrative to *moralitas* in 'The Cock and the Jasp'. In this view a dissatisfaction with heuristic exegesis emerges. There appears a sense that the dominant focus of interpretation should be the meaning defined in the letter of the text. The parameters of literary signification are from this perspective considered to be much more strictly delimited by the constraints of the literal sense.

These two possible views of literary signification are associated with two different concepts of authorship. The first assumes the ineffable comprehensiveness of an *auctor*'s intention, which both exceeds and validates any particular exposition of a text. The author's meaning is thus presented as essentially an imitation of the divine Word, mirroring its all-encompassing vision. The second view suggests that the *intentio auctoris*, far from being ineffable, consists of a specific and determinable viewpoint which is accessible through due attention to the specificities of

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6. On these aspects of 'The Lion and the Mouse' see Machan, 296-97. On the Fables' ascription to Aesop as a fictional background against which Henryson establishes his own role as *auctor*, see Robert L. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* (New York and London: Garland, 1993), pp.252-54.

the text. This latter view foregrounds the individual motivations and concerns of different writers, and stresses their literary creativity in constructing the text in such a way as to embody and express a particular outlook[7]. Thus, as Minnis observes of medieval Biblical exegesis, the strong emphasis on the literal sense from the thirteenth century onwards, which saw a diminishing of the value attached to allegorical exegesis, is accompanied by a much closer attention to the individual author's creative input, focusing on both his literary and moral activity[8].

Despite its innovative character, the suggestion in Henryson's work that ancient and modern writers alike can be considered as bearers of wisdom, does not necessarily involve a radical departure from the traditional concepts of *auctoritas* associated with literary *auctores*. While late-medieval Biblical exegesis sees a new emphasis on the individual writer's contribution to the text, there remains in medieval literary exegesis a strong emphasis on allegorical interpretation, along with a refusal to privilege limited and determinate authorial motivations as a guide to interpretation. While Minnis stresses the '"coming together" of sacred and secular texts within a universal interpretative model' (Minnis & Scott, p.4), his formulation of the developments in exegesis which made this possible indicates the difference between the two: 'Scriptural *auctores* were being read literally [...]; pagan poets were read allegorically or "moralised" - and thus the twain could meet.' (*Authorship*, p.142)

Hence, even in Italy where from an early date strong claims were being made for the *auctoritas* of modern writers, there was a powerful emphasis on the comprehensive nature of the significative framework of their work, as can be seen from the examples of the commentaries on Dante's *Commedia* by Guido da Pisa and Pietro Alighieri, discussed above (pp.112-13). Both these commentators, despite their radical esteem for a modern vernacular writer, nevertheless retain a traditional concept of the *auctor*. They avoid any sense that the individuating and particularising features of his work should be the dominant consideration in exegesis. As Guido's assertion that Dante was the pen of the Holy Spirit indicates, any such determinate limitations of meaning are ultimately derived from provisional and partial interpretative decisions by the reader, and the

7. See my observations on Petrarch on pp.152-55 below.
8. See *Authorship*, pp.85-112, *passim*.

text remains inscribed within a broader framework wherein the overall significance of Dante's work is assimilated to the divine *Verbum*.

A similar combination of innovative and traditional attitudes to authorship is evident in the *Fables*. While certain aspects of the poems undermine their ascription to Aesop and suggest that the modern writer can partake of the same *auctoritas* as the ancients, the heuristic mode of exegesis recommended in fables such as 'The Cock and the Jasp' and 'The Trial of the Fox' continues the traditional view of that *auctoritas*. Just as Guido da Pisa and Pietro Alighieri assimilate Dante's intention in the *Divine Comedy* to the comprehensive vision of the Holy Spirit, so the *auctoritas* which Henryson ascribes to Aesop but more covertly claims for himself is one which assumes a similarly overarching *intentio auctoris* authorising many different potential expositions.

Nor can Henryson's various heuristic interpretations be identified as arbitrary but useful similitudes in the manner suggested by William of Auvergne with regard to Biblical allegoresis[9]. The *moralitates* are not depicted as well-intentioned appropriations of texts whose true meaning may be quite different from that adduced in the *moralitas*. Henryson's emphasis on the *auctoritas* which underlies the *Fables* makes these readings co-extensive with an originary authorial *intentio*, retaining for them the status of expositions rather than impositions[10]. The author thus remains an impersonal figure whose texts only have their meaning individuated through the exegete's partial reading, which defines only certain aspects of the text's overall significance. While any given interpretation is thus seen to partake of particular motivations and contextual constraints, no such limits apply to the overall meaning of the authoritative text.

Henryson's retention of the view of a writer's *auctoritas* as consisting in a transcendent and ineffable *intentio*, even as he indicates the comparability of ancient and modern authors, is also apparent in 'The Lion and the Mouse'. In this fable the *auctoritas* claimed for Aesop is quietly transferred to the modern writer with no disruptive sense of the different interests and concerns proper to each of them. The only sense of incongruity in this transfer is manifested in the fact that Henryson does

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9. See above, Ch.2, pp.69-70.
10. On the supposition of continuity between medieval allegorical interpretations and authorial intention, see Copeland, pp.80-2.

not expressly assert his own *auctoritas* and dispense with Aesop altogether. This circumspection perhaps suggests a discomfort on Henryson's part over the possible presumptiousness of the modern writer's claim to an authority comparable to Aesop. But that discomfort is itself based on a sense of the transcendent nature of an *auctoritas* which may be felt to be above the reach of the moderns[11].

Thus there is no sense that the question of the authorship of the *Fables* should in any way affect their meaning or alter the way in which they should be approached by readers. It appears that whichever *auctor* they are written by, the learned citizen of Classical Rome or the fifteenth-century schoolmaster from Dunfermline, the significance of the fables remains essentially unaltered. The text is seen as opening onto a trans-historical meaning of universal validity and application, and as thus uniting with other works in an essentially undifferentiated *auctoritas*. Concern over originality and distinctive authorial interests or talents is, then, excluded from the depiction of the literary relationship between Henryson and Aesop. An awareness of the differences between the two writers may be implicit in the foregrounding of the narrator's literary activity, but these remain ultimately superficial as both ancient and modern are assimilated to the same comprehensive vision.

These aspects of the *Fables* indicate that, while Henryson departs from medieval convention in suggesting the parity of ancient and modern writers, he remains fundamentally conservative in his conception of authorship and the nature of a writer's *auctoritas*. Henryson's work thus testifies to the strong persistence of traditional concepts of authorship in discussions of secular literature, despite the more innovative attitudes current in Biblical scholarship.

There is, however, evidence that the sensitivity to the distinctive thematic and stylistic characteristics of an author's work which is found in late-medieval Biblical exegesis was beginning to impinge on the sphere of secular literature from the fourteenth century. Moreover, such is the complexity which characterises Henryson's work that these more novel attitudes towards authorship can be found therein alongside the traditional concepts detailed above. This can be illustrated by comparing Henryson's writings with those of Francis Petrarch (1304-74). Petrarch's

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11. For discussion of a similar sensitivity regarding modern claims to *auctoritas*, see Minnis' observations on Gower in *Authorship*, p.175.

levelling of the hierarchical distinction between ancient and modern writers and the reshaping of attitudes towards *auctores* which this entails provide an instructive contrast with the traditional aspects of Henryson's work and a useful comparison with the Scottish writer's more innovative concepts. By focusing on the ways in which certain aspects of the *Fables* imply a clear divergence from the views of Petrarch, while others suggest a parallel with those views, one can delineate clearly the ways in which heterogeneous attitudes are dramatically juxtaposed in Henryson's writings.

In the *Secretum*, a fictitious dialogue between Petrarch (appearing as Francesco) and St Augustine, concern is shown over the violation of authorial intention[12]. Francesco proposes an interpretation of Virgil's description of Aeolus in the cave of winds (*Aeneid*, I, 52-7):

> Ego autem, singula verba discutiens, audivi indignationem, audivi luctamen, audivi tempestates sonoras, audivi murmur ac fremitum. Hec ad iram referri possunt. Audivi rursum regem in arce sedentem, audivi sceptrum tenentum, audivi imperio prementem et vinclis ad carcere frenantem; que ad rationem quoque referri posse quis dubitet?
>
> (Bk II, p.104)

Augustine responds thus:

> Laudo hec, quibus abundare te video, poetice narrationis archana. Sive enim id Virgilius ipse sensit, dum scriberet, sive ab omni tali consideratione remotissimus, maritimam his versibus et nil aliud describere voluit tempestatem; hoc tamen, quod de irarum impetu et rationis imperio dixisti, facete satis et proprie dictum puto.
>
> (Ibid., pp.104-6)

Francesco's reading has many of the hallmarks of the Scholastic utilisation of poetry as an affective and mnemonic aid[13]. As in Henryson's *moralitates* to his fables, the interpretation is presented as provisional rather than definitive, as is indicated by the conditional tenses in 'referri possunt' and 'referri posse'. The interpretation is good not because it accurately captures the text's meaning, but because in terms of moral truth it is a valid *sententia* which puts the text to good use. But rather than grounding the reading in the author's intention, Petrarch has Augustine suggest that, while valuable, this interpretation may have been the furthest thing from Virgil's mind when writing.

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12. Petrarch, *Secretum*, ed. and trans. Enrico Carrara (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1955; Turin: Einaudi, 1977).
13. See Carruthers, pp.167-8.

Petrarch thus raises the possibility that the interpretation in question may merely be an appropriation of the *Aeneid*, and he thus distances his reading from the actual significative structure of the text[14]. Virgil, it seems, had quite precisely defined intentions, and this reading may not have been part of them.

Petrarch's *Epistolae Familiares* provides further instances of this sense of the individuality of the literary *auctor*, and of the particularised nature of his concerns[15]. In two letters to Boccaccio, Petrarch outlines his view of the relationship between ancient and modern writers. In Book XXII, epistle ii, he addresses the problem of originality, complaining that in his reading of classical *auctores* he has assimilated their work to such an extent that in his own writing their thoughts and styles occur to him as though new, leaving him hard pressed to discern clearly what is his own and what he has taken from his reading. He continues thus:

> Vitam michi alienis dictis ac monitis ornare, fateor, est animus, non stilum; nisi vel prolato auctore vel mutatione insigni, ut imitatione apium e multis et variis unum fiat. Alioquin multo malim meus michi stilus sit, incultus licet atque horridus, sed in morem toge habilis, ad mensuram ingenii mei factus, quam alienus, cultior ambitioso ornatu sed a maiore ingenio profectus atque undique defluens animi humilis non conveniens stature.
>
> (Vol.4, pp.106-7)

Hence, he argues, while an actor can adopt any kind of costume, a writer cannot adopt just any style (p.107):

> Suus cuique formandus servandusque est, ne vel difformiter alienis induti vel concursu plumas suas repetentium volucrum spoliati, cum cornicula rideamur. Et est sane cuique naturaliter, ut in vultu et gestu, sic in voce et sermone quiddam suum ac proprium, quod colere et castigare quam mutare cum facilius sum melius atque fecilius sit.
>
> (Ibid., p.107)

This concern over maintaining a clear sense of the individuality of both ancient and modern authors, and of seeing how that is embodied in literary style, is also expressed in Book XXIII, epistle xix. There, Petrarch discusses imitation and argues that one should adapt one's models in such a way as to transform what is taken from them into

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14. There is a parallel between the views which Petrarch expresses here and William of Auvergne's distinction between significations and similitudes in Biblical exegesis (see above, Ch.2, pp.69-70). This might be taken to confirm the relation between attitudes found in literary humanism and those found in Scholastic Biblical exegesis.

15. Petrarch, *Le Familiari*, ed. V. Rossi and U. Bosco, 4 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1933-42).

something recognisably one's own[16], a viewpoint implied in his above analogy of bees uniting nectar taken from diverse sources into a single honey. This is a far cry from the medieval writer's self-effacing submersion of his own literary activity within the validating *auctoritas* of his source. In Petrarch's view the modern writer is not merely a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants. Rather, the concern over poetic individuality shows that ancients and moderns are now seen as fellows within a common tradition, with the modern writer having his own strong and distinctive contribution to add to what he has learned from the ancients.

This view of ancients and moderns as fellow participants in a common tradition is similar to that expressed by Henryson when, in 'The Lion and the Mouse', he presents himself as being invited to continue the Aesopic tradition, addressing the corruption of his own day. But Petrarch's attitudes towards authorship clearly differ from the conservative aspects of Henryson's work outlined above. For Petrarch the sense of a common tradition uniting both ancient and modern authors is based on a recognition of the individual qualities of each, both in terms of their style and of their particular concerns and motivations in writing. Where Henryson seems to suggest that both ancient and modern writers can participate in a transcendent and essentially undifferentiated *auctoritas*, Petrarch views an *auctor* as a man speaking to men in his own distinctive voice and with his own particular message to impart. While such an *auctor* may be a great and even visionary figure, he remains essentially comprehensible and approachable on human terms.

Other aspects of Henryson's *Fables*, however, suggest that in certain respects he shares Petrarch's more innovative attitudes. As was argued in the previous chapter, Henryson sets against the universalising and heuristic exegesis of his *moralitates* an alternative perspective in which meaning is seen as established within the tale's discursive frame, with the concomitant implication that reading should respect the determinative claims of the text. This latter perspective parallels Petrarch's focus on the idiosyncrasies which distinguish the writings of different authors and which should therefore receive careful attention. A similarity to Petrarch's views, with the accent this time on authorial role rather than on textual semiotics, is also implicit in the presentation of the

16. Ibid., Vol.4, pp.203-7.

relationship between Aesop and his putative translator in the 'Prologue' to the *Fables*:

> Of this poete, my maisteris, with 3our leif,
> Submitting me to 3our correctioun,
> In mother toung, of Latyng, I wald preif
> To mak ane maner of translatioun [...].
> (ll.29-32)

Those aspects of the *Fables* which stress the modern writer's own contributions to the poems and his independence from Aesop indicate, of course, that this claim to be translating is false. But analysis of the terms in which Henryson defines this fictive role reveals a view of translation which departs significantly from medieval tradition in its assumptions about the nature of authorship and literary meaning.

The passage, while explicitly affirming a continuity between the *Fables* and the works of Aesop, also draws attention to the distance between them. The focus on the linguistic transition from Latin to vernacular is the key indicator of this distance. Henryson emphasises this linguistic disparity by stressing the difficulties of translation, as indicated by the word 'preif'. This emphasis is continued in the following stanza, where Henryson draws attention to the possibility of failure which results from the translator's 'hamelie language' and 'termes rude' (ll.36-42). This may suggest a sense of the paucity of the linguistic resources of Scots in comparison to Latin[17]. At any rate, it certainly expresses a concern over the narrator's capacity to match the eloquence of Aesop which again underscores the verbal and stylistic differences which separate their works. Furthermore, the translator's submitting himself to the correction of his audience may imply an invitation to compare translation and source, as may his later suggestion that they correct whatever they find to be 'deminute, or 3it superfluous' (ll.41-2). This again implies a sensitivity to areas of obvious divergence between the two texts.

The dominant view of translation in the Middle Ages was one in which close attention to the peculiarities of a text's linguistic formulation was frowned upon, with fidelity to *res* being prioritised over fidelity to *verba*[18]. This approach was instituted by St Jerome, whose dictum, 'non

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17. Gavin Douglas in fact makes this point explicitly, affirming that 'Besyde Latyn our langage is imperfite'. See Gavin Douglas, *Virgil's* Aeneid, ed. David F.C. Coldwell, 4 vols (Edinburgh: Scottish Texts Society, 1957), I, prologue, 359 (Vol.II).

18. Biblical translation is a general exception to this rule. See Copeland, p.50.

verbum e verbo, sed sensum [...] de sensu', provided western Christendom with a concept of translation as fidelity to a unitary signified, unimpeded by considerations of linguistic difference, which are seen to disrupt the proper grasp of meaning's transcendence of circumstance[19]. In terms of the fourfold division of authorial role into that of *scriptor*, *compilator*, *commentator*, and *auctor*, the translator is closest to the *commentator*, whose role, as Robert L. Kindrick observes, 'provided extensive latitude for insertion of authorial voice and personal prejudice.'[20] However, as with the *commentator*, this active role is still combined with a self-effacing claim of fidelity and subservience to the *auctor*[21]. While the source text may have *sententiae* imputed to it which are alien to its apparent sense, their character as misprisions and reconstructions can be effaced, as they remain ascribable to an *auctor* whose transcendent *intentio* opens the text onto meanings which are exterior to its form and language[22].

Henryson's discussion of translation in the 'Prologue' introduces considerations which run counter to this derogation of the signifier's priority in controlling meaning and interpretation. The 'Prologue' in fact suggests that right translation of Aesop requires a close attention to the verbal structure of the Latin source text, accompanied by a clear awareness of the linguistic and stylistic differences which must be taken into account if one is to emulate that structure in the vernacular. This

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19. St Jerome, *Epistola* LVII, *PL*, 22, 568-79, v (col.571). On the dominance of Jerome's model of translation in the Middle Ages, see Copeland, pp.46-55, where she also observes that even those who depart from Jerome's strictures do so in a way which still aims to recuperate a unitary signified from the differentiations of heterogeneous languages.

20. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, p.26. On the fourfold classification of authorial role, see ibid., pp.25-26. Kindrick himself suggests that the translator's role is closest to that of the *scriptor* (p.253), whom he defines as 'merely a transcriber' who 'conveys the text *nihil mutando* with an eye to precise preservation of what has been transmitted to him' (p.25). The scriptor's role thus involves the faithful reproduction of both text and *sententia*. In Jerome's definition, however, the translator's task involves fidelity to a sense which transcends *verba*. This licences a transformative approach to the source text which is prohibited to the *scriptor*.

21. On the combination of free translation with the self-effacing claim that the translator's work serves as a transparent window onto the works of his *auctores*, see Tim William Machan's comments on Lydgate (Machan, pp.285-95). See also Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.189-90.

22. On the definition of the commentator in terms which permit interpretative freedom to be conjoined with a self-effacing deference to the priority of the *auctor*, see above, Ch.3, pp.110-14. On the creative character of commentary, see Copeland, pp.63-86 (although her conception of the relation between translation *sensum de sensu* and the commentary tradition differs considerbly from mine). Some suggestive remarks on the relation between translation *sensum de sensu* and the tradition of allegorical commentary are provided in Morse, pp.198-200.

association of accurate translation with attention to textual form implies that Aesop's work is being viewed not merely as the repository of a transcendent wisdom, but as the distinctive product of an author whose individual literary traits must be respected if good faith in translation is to be maintained. Furthermore, the concern which the 'Prologue' expresses over the translator's stylistic limitations indicates that his task too is one which entails creativity. It suggests that he is not merely required to copy his source text, but that he should re-enact its act of signifying through his own manipulation of the vernacular. In these respects, Henryson's comments on translation suggest that his conception of authorial role does not fit neatly into any one of the categories of *scriptor*, *compilator*, *commentator*, or *auctor*. The *auctor*'s own work takes on an individuated character which prohibits the interpretative latitude of the *commentator*. Instead it demands a respect for formal and verbal structure which is more closely associated with the role of the *scriptor* in its concern over textual rather than merely sentential fidelity. Equally, the suggestion that the translator should exercise a command of his native language through which he can emulate the eloquence of his source assigns an explicitly creative element to his task. This expands the definition of the translator's role beyond what is provided for in the self-effacing categories of *scriptor*, *compilator*, or even *commentator*. It acquires an explicitly active character which, in placing an accent on the translator's own literary prowess, imbues his own achievements with intrinsic significance, and permits them to be viewed with an approbation traditionally reserved for *auctores*[23]. The model of translation implied in the 'Prologue' to the *Fables* thus differs from earlier definitions in involving both a greater need for strictness in observing constraints imposed by the formal structure of the source text, and an awareness that successful translation depends on the independent creativity of the translator.

In these respects, then, the *Fables* displays a sensitivity to authorial individuality and creativity, and to the distinct and comparable merits of both ancient and modern writers, which parallels the attitudes of Petrarch. The presence of such features in Henryson's work would seem to support the views of those critics who argue for the influence of

23. Kindrick also notes Henryson's accent on the creative nature of translation. See *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, p.253.

continental humanism on Henryson's writings[24]. R.J. Lyall, however, has vigorously opposed such claims. In an article aimed at refuting John MacQueen's arguments for the influence of Boccaccio on Henryson, Lyall concludes that there are no points where any direct influence can be clearly determined. He further notes that there are in fact many indications that Henryson was working from sources which deviate from the Fulgentian tradition within which Boccaccio's *De Genealoge* is squarely set[25]. Moreover, while admitting that Henryson frequently elaborates conventional material (pp.45-7), he does not consider Henryson's discussions of literary theory to go beyond the assertion of the basic and long-established view that poetry combines pleasure and profit (pp.55-6). Pointing out the traditional nature of the images of the nut's shell and of the flower pushing through the earth which occur in Henryson's discussion of literary theory in the 'Prologue', Lyall argues that Henryson is simply employing images which are either thoroughly traditional or expanding those he finds in Gualterus Anglicus (pp.54-7). He concludes that Henryson's work is 'characteristically medieval' (p.58), with humanism playing little or no part in it, and sees nothing therein which constitutes a significant departure from established medieval traditions.

There is much in Lyall's arguments to recommend them. Firstly, given how little is known of Henryson's life, and given the circumstantial and ambivalent nature of the textual evidence which has been cited in support of continental influence[26], Lyall's warning against giving hasty credence to speculations which are impossible to ascertain seems judicious. His insistence that the determining context for Henryson's work is a medieval one is also worth noting, and one with which I would

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24. For suggestions that the general world-picture which emerges in Henryson's writings bears a relation to values and philosophies associated with humanism, see Evelyn S. Newlyn, 'Humanism and Theodicy: Oppositions in the Poetry of Robert Henryson', in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Scottish Language and Literature: Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. R.J. Lyall and F. Riddy (Stirling and Glasgow: Stirling University Press, 1981), pp.251-9, and Stephen Kohl, 'Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*: Part of the Medieval Tradition?', in ibid. pp.285-300. For suggestions of literary and theoretical influence, see MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp.18-23; R.D.S. Jack, *The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), pp.7-14; Robert L. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* (New York and London: Garland, 1993), pp.373-80.

25. R.J. Lyall, 'Henryson and Boccaccio: A Problem in the Study of Sources', *Anglia*, 99 (1981), 38-59. For MacQueen's arguments, see *Robert Henryson*, pp.18-23.

26. The circumstantial and inconclusive nature of the evidence is fully acknowledged by the proponents of the view that Henryson was subject to continental influence. See Jack, p.13; Kindrick, *Robert Henryson*, pp.280-2, 305.

agree fully. But this is not the same as arguing Henryson to be '*characteristically* medieval'. This affirmation in fact ignores the very untraditional sense of difficulty in the 'Prologue' imagery which Henryson uses to describe fable, and which Lyall cites as evidence of his conventionality. It is in this narrow understanding of Henryson's relation to medieval traditions that Lyall's arguments must meet with objections. A more flexible conception of the relation between Renaissance humanism and medieval Scholasticism can permit one to recognise the innovative character of Henryson's work while maintaining a sense of his commitment to medieval traditions. John MacQueen, setting Henryson in the context of the 'Northern Renaissance', sees his work as effecting a mutual adaptation between humanist and medieval attitudes. In this process, humanistic concepts are incorporated within a medieval framework, while at the same time that framework is transformed in the direction of humanism[27]. Robert L. Kindrick offers a similarly flexible perspective in his summation of Henryson's deployment of medieval rhetorical traditions:

> Henryson's freshness in his use of every tradition that he approached is also remarkable. While he would have likely taught the elements of the *ars poetriae* and would have been familiar with the *ars dictaminis*, most scholars who approach his work would agree that his poems do not 'smell of the lamp.' His use of the *ars praedicandi* also shows such innovation. Henryson uses the techniques of the art of preaching but substantially modifies them through his use of the first personal tone, his introduction of Aristotelian psychology, his extra attention to detail in characterization, and other devices. In part, John MacQueen is correct that in this sense Henryson's rhetoric suggests his movement towards Renaissance humanism. Yet Roderick Lyall is also accurate in suggesting that the general framework of Henryson's work is medieval, owing a considerable debt to the scholarly traditions of which he would have become aware in his academic training.
>
> (*Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, pp.255-56)

MacQueen's perspective allows for the possibility that whatever Henryson may have derived from humanism is best understood in Scholastic terms, having been transformed in Henryson's creative appropriation of it, even as that appropriation transforms the protocols of Scholasticism. Kindrick's perspective, in highlighting Henryson's creative and transformative relation to medieval tradition, similarly provides a mode of understanding in which appreciation of the innovative

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27. See above, Ch.2, p.97, n.95.

characteristics of Henryson's work can be combined with a recognition of its thoroughly Scholastic grounding.

It is my contention that, regardless of where Henryson's more novel concepts of authorial role originate, their humanistic affiliations are superficial. They are inscribed within Henryson's texts as part of a modification of Scholastic literary theory, and they are most intelligible when seen in the context of such theory. As Kindrick observes in the passage cited immediately above, Henryson does not employ traditional material and conventions in a passive manner. Rather his approach is exemplified in 'The Cock and the Jasp' which, while affirming Scholastic interpretative protocols, nevertheless utilises them critically, transforming and adapting them. The innovative attitudes found in Henryson's work are structured according to criteria laid down by Scholastic theory in a manner made possible by the inbuilt flexibility and dynamism of that theory, and by Henryson's own creativity in drawing on traditional resources.

The extent to which specific elements of Henryson's work can both parallel humanistic literary attitudes and at the same time diverge from them quite dramatically in its underlying assumptions can be demonstrated through a comparison with Gavin Douglas' *Eneados*. The rest of this chapter will accordingly examine the similarities and differences between attitudes towards authorship in Douglas' work and in *The Testament of Cresseid*, where Henryson's more innovative concepts find their fullest expression.

4

As Eugene Vance writes in *Mervelous Signals*, among humanist translators, 'Emulation of the signifier (as well as of the signified) began to alter the nature and purpose of translation' (p.322). This can be seen in Gavin Douglas' translation of the *Aeneid*, where Douglas berates Caxton for presuming to offer a prose translation of a French text as the work of Virgil:

> Thocht Will3ame Caxtoun, of Inglis natioun,
> In pros hes present ane buik of Inglys gros,
> Clepand it Virgill in Eneados,

> Quhilk that he sais of Franch he dyd translait,
> It has na thing ado tharwith, God wait [...].
> (Bk I, Prol., ll.138-42 [Vol.II])

As Douglas satirically observes, Caxton's text and that of Virgil are 'na mair like than the devill and Sanct Austyne' (ibid., l.143).

In his own practice as a translator Douglas aims to follow Virgil's text as closely as possible:

> Quha is attachit ontill a staik, we se,
> May go na ferthir, bot wreil about that tre:
> Richt so am I to Virgillis text ybund,
> I may nocht fle, les than my falt be fund [...].
> (Ibid., ll.297-300)

This, however, does not imply literal word-for-word translation, and Douglas in fact takes Chaucer to task for claiming in *The Legend of Good Women* that he could follow Virgil's text in this way (ibid., ll.339-46). For Douglas, it is necessary that fidelity to the source text be balanced by an awareness of where one must depart from it.

This departure, necessitated by linguistic disparity and the need for explanation of possibly obscure passages so as to clearly convey the text's meaning, compels the translator to be a creative artist, not merely a slavish copyist. The translator actively effects a mutual adaptation between the original significance and literary devices of the source text and the linguistic and cultural resources of the medium into which it is being translated. Hence Douglas states that he must modify the language available to him in order to better emulate the original Latin of Virgil:

> Lyk as in Latyne bene Grew termys sum,
> So me behufyt quhilum, or than be dum
> Sum bastard Latyne, Frensch or Inglis oyss,
> Quhar scant was Scottis - I had nane other choys.
> Nocht for our tong is in the selwyn scant
> Bot for that I the fowth of language want
> Quhar as the colour of his properte
> To kepe the sentence tharto constrenyt me [...].
> (Ibid., ll.115-22)

Conversely, he recognises the need to depart from Virgil's precise terms in order to express his meaning in the language of early sixteenth-century Scotland:

> Sum tyme the text mon haue ane expositioun,
> Sum tyme the collour will caus a litill additioun,
> And sum tyme of a word I mon mak thre, [...]
> Eik weill I wait syndry expositouris seir

> Makis on a text sentens diuers to heir,
> As thame apperis, accordyng thair entent,
> And for thar part schawis ressonys euident.
> All this is ganand, I will weill it swa be,
> Bot a sentens to follow may suffice me.
> Sum tyme I follow the text als neir I may
> Sum tyme I am constrenyt ane other way. [...]
> For thar bene Latyn wordis mony ane
> That in our leyd ganand translatioun has nane
> Les than we mynys thar sentence and grauyte
> And 3it scant weill exponyt.
>
> (Ibid., ll.347-66)

The value which Douglas attaches to the letter of Virgil's text is clear from his exclusion of 'sentence diuers' from consideration in translation. To introduce allegorical levels of meaning in translation, even though such interpretations may be valid, is to depart from the one *sentence*, embodied in the letter, which is Douglas' primary consideration. But Douglas also recognises that the differences between languages and the need for explanation of certain passages necessitate the modification of the original text through addition and expansion. Furthermore, he states that the limited resources of the vernacular in comparison to Latin, and his own inferior wit when compared to Virgil, introduce another level of necessary difference in producing an inferiority of style:

> Quhy suld I than, with dull forhed and vaye,
> With ruide engyne and barrand emptyve brayn,
> With bad, harsk spech and lewit barbour tong
> Presume to write quhar thy sueit bell is rung,
> Or contyrfate sa precyus wordys deir? [...]
> 3it with thy leif, Virgile, to follow the,
> I wald into my rurall wlgar gros
> Wryte sum savoryng of thyne Eneados.
>
> (Ibid., ll.19-44)

For Douglas, translation appears as an interplay of similitude and difference, and of imitation and invention. It requires both an awareness of the constraints which the form and meaning of the original text exert on composition, and a creative power in modifying both the language available to the translator and certain elements of the source text in order to produce an intelligible vernacular version which captures as fully as possible the essence of the Latin original. Douglas thus gives fuller and more explicit expression to the view of translation suggested in Henryson's 'Prologue' to the *Fables*. His conception of the translator's role entails both the restrictions imposed on the *scriptor* and the independent creativity associated with the *auctor*.

Douglas' careful consideration of the task of the translator is essentially motivated by an awareness of the irreducible importance of the text's material form and structure as the product of the eloquence of an individual writer. It is a perception of the artistry of the original poet which requires that the translator display a similar artistry and inventiveness in his use of the vernacular if his translation is to emulate the achievement which is his *auctor*'s text. It is a similar perception of the individual resources of different languages, and of the distinctive literary styles of himself and Virgil, which underlies his awareness of the necessary differences which must obtain between their works. For Douglas the act of translation entails not merely the transmission of a signified meaning but also close attention to the signifier in both the source text and the translation, necessitating a clear awareness of the distinctive literary resources and talents of both *auctor* and translator. In this he embodies what A.C. Spearing has described as the most characteristic features of Renaissance thought: 'a new sense of the historical distance and difference inherent in classical texts, [...] together with a sense of the possibility of overcoming that distance and difference by creative imitation.'[28]

Douglas' focus on the individuating qualities of literary texts, and on *auctores* as models who invite creative imitation, is also evident in attitudes towards poetry throughout the fifteenth century in Scotland. One need only look at the reputations of Chaucer and the English Chaucerians among fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Scottish writers to see this. In *The Kingis Quair*, Chaucer and Gower are referred to as 'Superlative as poetis laureate, / In moralitee and eloquence ornate'[29]. Similarly, in *The Golden Targe*, Dunbar writes enthusiastically of the poetic styles of Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate, the following lines referring specifically to the latter two[30]:

> Your sugurit lippis and tongis aureate,
> Bene to our eris cause of grete delyte;
> Your angel mouthis most mellifluate
> Our rude language has clere illumynate [...].
> (ll.263-66)

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28. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, p.13.
29. *The Kingis Quair of James Stewart*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid (London: Heinemann, 1973), 200-1.
30. Dunbar, *The Golden Targe*, in *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. W. Mackay Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Porpoise, 1932).

Neither the author of *The Kingis Quair* nor Dunbar ignores *sententia*, the former referring to 'moralitee' as well as 'eloquence' and the latter writing of 'morall Gower', and drawing a distinction between the 'mater' of a text and the language which expresses it (ll.257-58). But the emphasis on stylistic brilliance, powerfully evoked and imitated by Dunbar especially, makes it clear that the letter of the text has an equally high, if not even greater, value placed on it. Eugene Vance's observation regarding Renaissance humanist culture, that 'richness of discourse was now thought to reside not merely in the signified, or the *sententia*, but in the very fabric of the signifier, in the *verbum* as a production of material sound'[31], applies equally to these comments by Scottish poets who were near-contemporaries of Henryson.

The attitudes of these poets indicate a developing concept of the relation between ancient and modern writers in literary composition which is closer to the neo-classical concept of imitation as an active literary exercise based on prior models than to the more typically medieval concept where writing becomes the partial exposition of a prior meaning ascribed to an ancient *auctor*. Where the latter authorises the combination of often radical departures from the source text with the self-effacing ascription of all responsibility for a work to that *auctor*, the former demands both respect for one's source and a clear awareness of where one departs from it. The emphasis on style in the praise which Dunbar and the author of the *Quair* give to Chaucer and his English literary heirs represents them as positive exemplars for later writers to emulate in their own work, as is clear from the stylistic virtuosity with which Dunbar, in particular, extols their virtues. Thus Dunbar and the author of *The Kingis Quair*, like Douglas, present a pointed and explicit statement of the attitudes towards authorship and the literary text implied in Henryson's discussion of translation in the 'Prologue' to the *Fables*.

In the *Testament of Cresseid* the innovative attitudes implicit in the *Fables* are stated much more overtly. Henryson here expresses a sense of the parity between ancient and modern writers, and of the individuating qualities of authoritative works, and approves originality as a legitimate feature of writing. In these respects, as Tim William Machan has observed, the *Testament* expresses a conception of

31. Vance, p.321.

authorship and literary authority which breaks from traditional medieval attitudes[32]. In the *Testament* it is no longer the case that 'it is these prior texts of classical poets and learned commentators which are typically judged the only authoritative texts both in the sense of being original creations and in the sense of having the unimpeachable "auctoritas" of an "*auctor*."'[33] Henryson presents Chaucer as a modern vernacular *auctor*, credited with having produced in his *Troilus and Criseyde*[34] a distinctive and valuable work: 'Writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious' (l.141). Chaucer is further praised for his rhetorical skills, described as having written the book 'In gudelie termis and in ioly veirs' (l.59). Henryson thus emphasises Chaucer's active contribution to the *Troilus*, disregarding Chaucer's frequent claims that he merely reports what his *auctor* Lollius has written, having no responsibility for the meaning, style or verbal form of the poem, as in the stanza prefacing the *Canticus Troili*:

> And of his song naught only the sentence,
> As writ myn auctor called Lollius,
> But pleinly, save oure tonges difference,
> I dar wel seyn, in al, that Troilus
> Seyde in his song, loo, every word right thus
> As I shall seyn [...].
>
> (*T&C*, I, 393-98 [p.478])

It may, however, be more accurate to say that Henryson perceives the subtler aspects of Chaucer's disclaimers, a subtlety evinced in the above instance by the fact that Chaucer proceeds to open the *Canticus Troili* with a translation of one of Petrarch's sonnets (ll.400-420), thus conjoining it with material drawn and freely adapted from Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. Chaucer may have his sources, but they are not what he claims them to be and he is far from following them slavishly. His exaggerated claim to be doing so to the letter only serves to highlight this fact.

The idea that modern writers can have merits comparable to those of ancient writers, and can thus be praised for their literary activity, is also expressed by Henryson in the discussion of the provenance of the 'vther quair' (l.61) from which the narrative of Cresseid's fate is supposedy derived:

> Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?

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32. Machan, 298.
33. Ibid., 281.
34. *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, pp.473-585.

Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
Be authoreist, or fein3it of the new
Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun

Maid to report the lamentatioun
And wofull end of this lustie Cresseid [...].
(ll.64-69)

The question of whether the 'vther quair' partakes of an established *auctoritas* or is a wholly new invention is raised here only to be left unexamined and unresolved. In the next stanza Henryson plunges into the narrative of this mysterious book with the words 'Quhen Diomeid had all his appetyte' (l.71). This suggests that the questions raised are felt to be of little importance, and that the tale is worth recounting regardless of whether it is history or fiction, ancient or modern: one may treat new and established authors alike. Each has his own valid contribution to make.

Furthermore, the 'vther quair' is afforded the same status as the work of the *auctor* Chaucer. Chaucer's poem is not taken as a definitive work whose authority must always be deferred to, but is seen as one of a number of possible constructions of the story of Troilus and Cresseid. The historical accuracy of the *Troilus* is in doubt just as much as that of Henryson's alleged source: 'Quha wait gif all that Chaucer wrait was trew?' In thus emphasising the provisionality of both Chaucer's work and the other text, Henryson recognises the value of both while allowing them to co-exist with their differentiating qualities intact, and he leaves open the possibility of other legitimate constructions of the story in which other writers may introduce their own innovations. Hence, while the *Troilus* and the *Testament* disagree in their accounts of the fates of Troilus and Cresseid (in the former Troilus dies without seeing Cresseid again after she goes to Diomeid, while in the latter they do in fact meet again), both poems can nevertheless be seen as equally valid on their own terms. The texts which Henryson cites are not arranged in a hierarchy of *auctoritas*, despite the fact that earlier in the Middle Ages the anonymity of the 'vther quair' would have severely limited its worth in comparison to the work of an established *auctor*[35]. Nor are the differences between them minimised in an attempt to stress their conformity with unified truth. Rather both texts are seen as distinctive and co-equal literary contributions within an open textual field. It seems that *auctores* need no

35. See *Authorship*, pp.11-12.

longer harmonise with each other in a univocal and undifferentiated *auctoritas*, but are permitted their own idiosyncrasies and innovations.

This tendency to recognise, accept and even respect the individuating features of a writer's work accords with the implications of Henryson's emphasis on Chaucer's rhetorical prowess. This emphasis not only foregrounds Chaucer's active contribution to the *Troilus*, but also tends to represent his work as a model to be imitated rather than as a definitive source of *auctoritas*. In this we see an attitude towards Chaucer similar to that of Dunbar, where rather than inviting a self-deprecating deference, Chaucer's work is instead seen as inspiring other writers to actively emulate his achievements in their own literary productions. Again, the emphasis is on original and distinctive literary activity as a legitimate goal for the writer, and one authorised by the example of established *auctores*.

The implications of Henryson's treatment of both Chaucer and the author of the 'vther quair' are thus quite different from the attitude generally prevalent earlier in the Middle Ages where, in the words of Alistair Minnis, 'no "modern" writer could decently be called an *auctor* in a period where men saw themselves as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, i.e. the ancients.' (*Authorship*, p.12). Instead Henryson suggests that modern writers may have their own distinctive things to say, and should be approached on that basis rather than denigrated in comparison to ancient *auctores*.

The parallels with the attitudes of Douglas, and of Petrarch, are clear. Yet for all its humanistic overtones, further analysis will show that the attitudes underlying Henryson's conception of authorial role in the *Testament* are thoroughly Scholastic. Those aspects of his work which depart most radically from traditional medieval concepts of literary authorship are in fact introduced as part of a critical and modificatory engagement with the theoretical traditions he inherits, an engagement comparable to his creative treatment of medieval rhetorical traditions as described by Kindrick. The new concepts which appear in Henryson's work will be shown to have been shaped within the framework of Scholastic literary theory and to retain its fundamental concerns about the nature of literary signification, so that those concepts receive a very different emphasis from that placed on them by the Renaissance humanists.

5

The differences between the innovations which appear in Henryson's work and the similar attitudes found in Renaissance humanism can be illustrated by comparing the presentation of *auctores* in the *Testament* with Douglas' view of Virgil in the *Eneados*. Douglas' attitudes are superficially comparable to conventional Scholastic theory in that he assigns Virgil an almost divine level of authority, emphasising the richness of his *sentence*, the depth of his insight, and the perfection of his style:

> Quha may thy versis follow in all degre
> In bewtie, sentence and in grauite? [...]
> Of Helicon so drank thou dry the flude
> That of thy copios fouth or plenitude
> All mon purches drink at thi sugurit tun;
> So lamp of day thou art, and schynand son [...].
> Thou art Vesper, and the day stern at morow;
> Thow Phebus lightnar of the planetis all -
> I not quhat dewly I the clepe sall,
> For thou art al and sum, quhat nedis more,
> Of Latyn poetis that sens wes or befor.
>
> (Bk I, Prol., ll.53-65)

The proliferation of terms of praise, culminating in the inexpressibility topos of 'I not quhat dewlie I the clepe sall', clearly stresses the superlative and transcendent merit of Virgil, while the association of him with the heavenly bodies places him on a level approaching the divine. Terms such as 'copiose', 'plenitud', 'al and sum', emphasise the fullness of meaning of Virgil's works which recalls the Scholastic assimilation of the meaning of the works of *auctores* to the comprehensive vision embodied in the divine Word.

Yet Douglas differs from the Scholastics in that this praise of his *auctor* is accompanied by an emphasis on Virgil's individual creative power, on the distinguishing features of his literary achievement, and on his value as a model for new writers to emulate in their own works. This is apparent from his view of translation as involving a respect for the distinctive qualities of the source text, and as requiring the translator to exercise his own poetic craft in order to emulate those qualities in his own

historical and cultural context[36]. For Douglas, the positive emphasis on Virgil's quasi-divine powers and insight is accompanied by an awareness that his literary achievement is bounded by concrete circumstance, the *Aeneid* being viewed as an individuated and distinctive work, produced within a specific historical environment and employing particular cultural resources. In his insistence on the need to be aware of and respect these features of Virgil's work, Douglas' attitude towards authorship expresses a sense of the contiguity of the human and the divine, the particular and the universal, wherein the individuating and diversified elements of temporal reality retain an essential and irreducible value.

This attitude is evident in the thought of other Renaissance humanists. Erasmus, for instance, displays it in his rendition of the first line of the Gospel of St John when producing his new Latin translation of the Bible. What had previously been translated as 'In principio erat verbum' becomes 'In principio erat sermo'. As Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle has argued, in thus replacing 'verbum' with 'sermo' as a translation of the Greek 'logos', Erasmus effects a dramatic change in emphasis from what had gone previously[37].

In the traditional medieval view, *Verbum* expresses the singularity of the divine Word and is contrasted with the inherent plurality of human words which necessarily depart from this ideal unity. Such multiplicity is associated with the limits of human perspective: unable to grasp the Word in its singularity, fallen humanity can only arrive at partial and provisional versions thereof. This view is notably expressed by Henryson in 'The Preaching of the Swallow', where he contrasts 'The profound wit off God omnipotent' to whom all things are present 'Befoir the sicht of his diuinite' (ll.1622-28), with the weak understanding of humanity, for whom it is difficult 'To knaw the thingis in nature manifest' (l.1642):

For God is in his power infinite,

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36. The extent to which Douglas actually practises what he preaches has been a matter of some debate. For an analysis of Douglas' literary practice as a translator which sees him as essentially faithful to his ideals, see Priscilla Bawcutt, *Gavin Douglas: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), pp.95-163. A.E.C. Kanitz, however, sees Douglas as lacking any real historical sense in his translation and as frequently, perhaps without realising it, medievalising Virgil. See his 'From *Aeneid* to *Eneados*: Theory and Practice of Gavin Douglas's Translation', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 17 (1991), 81-97 (esp. p.93).

37. On Erasmus' translation and the controversy it provoked, see Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pp.1-31.

> And mannis saull is febill and ouer small,
> Off vnderstanding waik and unperfite
> To comprehend him that contenis all.
> (ll.1643-49)

The representations produced by fallen humanity can only provide a partial and uncertain vision. In order to approach the certitude of the divine it is necessary to transcend such limits.

For Erasmus, however, the word 'sermo', especially when considered as replacing 'verbum' in the first sentence of John's Gospel, presents the diversified aspects of human language as already inscribed within the 'logos'. Erasmus thus aims to affirm the positive connection between human and divine language without compromising or reducing the individuated qualities of the former. As Eugene Vance has noted, where the contrast of *Verbum* and *verba* suggests the inadequacy of human language which the soul must transcend in order to approach the divine, for Erasmus the *logos* as *sermo* becomes a legitimising paradigm for the proper exercise of eloquence:

> Erasmus associated *verbum* with the inner activity of the soul struggling to extricate itself from the world, while *sermo* signified a notion of divine oratory as colloquial fraternalism in Christ, expressed not only through the inner man but through the institutions of national grammars as well.[38]

Hence the poet's creative activity is seen as mirroring the divine act of creation, a view expressed by Sir Philip Sidney:

> [...] Give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature [i.e. physical nature]: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings [...].[39]

For Douglas, Erasmus and other Renaissance humanists, the positive connection between human language and divine vision occurs in an almost eucharistic form, whereby the two can meet with neither being compromised. A sense of the plenitude of the *auctor*'s meaning can be maintained while giving the fullest regard to those creative and individuating factors.

In this Erasmus and Douglas clearly differ from the Scholastics, who tend to view such particularising factors as limitations of human *verba* which distance meaning from the certitude of the divine *Verbum*. This sense of distance underlies the interpretative freedom shown by

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38. Vance, pp.319-20. See also Boyle, pp.28-31, 140-41.
39. Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp.24-5.

medieval exegetes as they differentiate the comprehensive unity of the transcendent *intentio* which underlies the text into particularised formulations. A given reading which foregrounds specific teachings and tenets of faith is not to be understood as the final word on the text. It is to be viewed as having been defined with reference to a specific pedagogic discipline and to the moral and educational requirements of the audience being addressed. While this introduces a recognition and acceptance of the interpretative activity of the exegete, who provides one particular construction of a text's overall meaning, that activity is intrinsically related to the limitations of human vision, which is incapable of grasping the comprehensive *intentio auctoris* in its totality.

Furthermore, the threat that this negative sense of the contrast between Word and words might result in an undermining of authority is neutralised by having it operate in tandem with a sense of the positive connection between the two. The *sententia* adduced by the exegete, despite its inadequacy in the face of the unified body of meaning within which the text resonates, derives a universal validity from its participation therein. This participation provides meaning with a point of origin which transcends the contingent constraints that shape the exegete's interpretative decisions. Indeed, the exegete's activity is seen to consist in the actualisation of truths which exist *in potente* within the comprehensive *intentio auctoris*. The awareness of the contingent factors which necessitate the differentiation of a unified body of truth into diverse aspects is thus contained within a framework which affirms the ideality of meaning, its ultimate transcendence of textuality. For the Scholastics, then, when meaning is considered as having been influenced by the interpretative activity of the exegete and shaped according to his particular motivations and concerns, it is viewed as inadequate in the face of the divine Word. When it is considered as having been already implicit within the Word and as thus subsisting prior to the exegete's interpretative activity, its authority is affirmed.

It is this Scholastic conception of the relation between meaning and circumstance which underlies Henryson's attitudes towards authorship in the *Testament*. For all that Henryson expresses a view in which literary texts are seen as original and distinctive productions of an individual *auctor*, inviting emulation and new creativity, his focus on such features is accompanied not by a positive sense of the fullness of an

auctor's meaning, but by an awareness of its limitations. It is precisely in so far as Chaucer's text may *not* be true, instead being only a partial and inadequate construction, that the active creation of new works modelled on his own is authorised. Henryson's view of the literary text as expressing the individual concerns and motivations of the *auctor* is accompanied not by any sense of the quasi-divine nature of the *auctor*'s insight and creativity, but by a recognition of the partial and provisional nature of his text's meaning. It is this recognition which legitimises the production of different and original works. Individual creativity is thus, for Henryson, a consequence of the limitations of human vision.

The legitimising of authorial creativity and originality which appears in the *Testament* is thus founded on the same sense of distance from the fullness of the divine Word as underlies the interpretative freedom claimed by Scholastic exegetes. Where Henryson differs from his Scholastic forebears is in his refusal to reabsorb this sense of distance within an affirmation of the certitude which obtains from the authorising connection to the *Verbum*. Henryson certainly presents the narrative of the 'vther quair' as being worthy of consideration despite the doubts as to its provenance and authority. But by framing it within these doubts he encourages one to view the text with a critical eye, markedly qualifying the assent which it commands. Whatever moral or spiritual import the narrative may have remains intimately bound up with the circumstances within which it was produced. Unlike the *sententiae* which Scholastic exegetes adduce, the relation between the significance of the *Testament* and universally applicable norms is an irreducibly oblique one.

If Henryson's sensitivity to the ways in which texts are bounded and individuated by the temporal constraints within which they are produced associates his attitudes with those characteristic of Renaissance humanism, his depiction of such particularising factors as something which compromises the ideal certitude which can be attached to a text's significance marks his divergence from the perspectives of figures such as Douglas and Erasmus. Henryson maintains the Scholastic and early-medieval suspicion of those elements of literature which focus attention on the ways in which meaning is produced. But rather than reducing such elements to a merely instrumental function and defining a text's significative structure as one of indicial reference, Henryson foregrounds their influence in the construction of meaning and confronts all the

inadequacies which acceptance of that influence entails. His view of literary texts as distinctive products of authorial creativity which invite emulation and the exercise of new creativity on the part of other writers is underpinned by a destabilising sense of the contingent limitations which characterise the significance of such particularised works. In this, while departing from the traditional norms of academic Scholastic literary theory, Henryson's depiction of authorship in the *Testament* remains rooted in the attitudes towards literary representation which that framework provides.

That the conceptual framework of medieval Scholasticism should provide the materials from which Henryson's literary innovations are produced demonstrates the extent to which his relation to tradition is a creative and transformative one. Scholastic literary theory does not govern Henryson's work as a normative set of protocols. Rather, it provides him with a dynamic conceptual network which lends itself to being opened in new and different ways, making possible the very aspects of Henryson's literary attitudes which bring him closest to the positions of Renaissance humanism.

6

The different images of the *auctor* which appear in Henryson's works are at the core of a complex nexus of attitudes towards literature. Henryson's attitudes towards authorship raise broader issues concerning the nature of literary signification and the process of reading. These attitudes are thus connected to a more general reflection on the nature of literary discourse in which the definitions and protocols of Scholastic literary theory are rigorously interrogated. This interrogative approach to Scholastic theory underlies and accounts for one of the most striking features of Henryson's constructions of authorial role: the fact that they tend in such various directions. On the one hand, the depiction in the *Fables* of the *intentio auctoris* as a transcendent and comprehensive body of meaning which is assimilated to the divine Word, and which authorises a wide diversity of legitimate interpretations, opens the text onto a body of universal truth which extends its significance far beyond that established within the frame of the text. In these terms any adduced meaning is validated by its consonance with Christian doctrine and by its

being fitted to the ethical requirements of the reader. Correct reading consists in relating the text to a prior moral or spiritual truth and, in recognition of its normative status, bringing one's own life into conformity with the universal wisdom communicated therein.

On the other hand, the depiction of the *auctor* as an individual with his own concerns and idiosyncrasies represents a text's significance as being bounded by particularising contexts and thus much further removed from any ideal extra-textual basis. Within this framework, forces such as the author's individual motivations, the constraints of temporal circumstances, and the rules of art all contribute to the shaping of a determinate meaning which remains closely bound up with the material signifier. Reading must thus involve a close attention to the details of the text in order to discover the specific character of the *intentio* which it embodies. If the first view of authorship invites one to understand a text's significance as an array of universal norms the grasp of which will enable one to raise the actual to the level of the ideal, this second view emphasises the ways in which that significance is radically circumscribed by the individuating and differentiating constraints of actuality, which for Henryson drastically compromise the normativity and ideality of meaning.

Henryson is wholly comfortable with neither of these alternatives. His depiction of authorship in the *Testament* demonstrates a desire to see literary meaning being as closely related to concrete circumstance as possible, in line with the affective and ethical emphasis of Scholastic literary theory. Equally, his awareness of the limitations which attend such particularised significance in its departure from any transcendent basis makes clear his continued indebtedness to the idealising tendency of Scholasticism. Perhaps more than any other writer of the time, Henryson is acutely sensitive to the tension which arises between these two aspects of Scholastic literary theory in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the difficulty of reconciling them. The shifting views of authorship which appear in his work articulate an uncertainty over how to define the function of literature in the light of the growing sense of disparity between the particular and the universal.

These different views of authorship, however, also testify to Henryson's serious desire to find a response to this sense of disparity in terms which can maintain both the key emphases of Scholastic theory.

His work sees a variety of strategies being adopted and tested in order to provide some sense of contiguity between the ideal and the actual. Thus, as was argued in the previous chapter, 'The Cock and the Jasp' and 'The Trial of the Fox' both aim to reaffirm the value of heuristic interpretation, with the text being seen as framed within a comprehensive *intentio auctoris* which exists in potential to a broad range of valid interpretations. But this reaffirmation is couched in such a way as to underscore the need to accompany reading with penitential self-examination, relating moral norms back to the particulars of one's own life. A similar concern underlies the suggestion that modern *auctores* can participate with the ancients in a transcendent and undifferentiated *auctoritas*: Aesop's injunction to the narrator of 'The Lion and the Mouse', 'My fair child, / Perswaid the kirkmen ythandly to pray' (ll.1615-16) affirms that both writers commonly participate in and communicate a unified body of universal wisdom, while at the same time underscoring the fact that such wisdom remains directly relevant to the world addressed by the modern *auctor*. If the *Fables* never settles on a single satisfactory resolution of the difficulties which it addresses, it is because, as 'The Two Mice' demonstrates, the problem is such that the interpretation of temporal circumstance in the light of *a priori* moral categories gives an inadequate and insensitive account of its complexities, while at the same time remaining necessary if one is to arrive at any meaningful understanding of the facts and processes of existence.

The discussion of authorship which prefaces the narrative of *The Testament of Cresseid* is part of what is perhaps Henryson's fullest attempt to provide a comprehensive response to the problems foregrounded in 'The Two Mice'. In stressing the text's firm grounding in the constraints of temporal reality and its resultant provisional status, Henryson emphasises the inadequacy of any attempt fully to embody truth in literary representation. The *Testament* thus avoids any totalising absorption of particular reality within simple moral categories by signalling its own status as a necessarily partial textual construct. By textualising the *Testament* in this way, Henryson seeks to preserve the ethical focus of Scholastic literary theory in the face of the gulf between the universal and the particular, aiming to present a moralising focus more fully aware of the complexities of contingent existence which prevent its easy assimilation to moral absolutes. How Henryson develops

this aim within the narrative of the *Testament*, and how he balances it with the need to preserve a sense of the ideal basis of meaning, form the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Hard is thy Dome: Judgement and Perspectivism in *The Testament of Cresseid*

> Jam vide quam stultum sit in tanta corpia verissimarum sententiarum, quae de illis verbis erui possunt temere affirmare, quam earum Moyses potissimum senserit; et perniciosis contentionibus ipsam offendere charitatem, propter quam dixit omnia, cujus dicta conamur exponere.
>
> (Augustine, *Conf.*, XII, xxv, col.840)

1

Modern critics of *The Testament of Cresseid* are strikingly divided into two opposing camps: those who regard the poem as a confident affirmation of faith in divine providence and justice, and those who view its significance as entirely secular[1]. The former opinion is succinctly expressed by E.M.W. Tillyard:

> The consequences [of Cresseid's actions] are not the mere facts that Cresseid was punished and died a leper, but that through the working of God's will she was punished, brought to penitence, and ended by taking the blame on herself: in fact the story of her salvation according to the Christian scheme.[2]

Proponents of this Christianising perspective tend to view the *Testament* as expounding an ascetic, other-worldly morality. John MacQueen comments negatively on Cresseid's nostalgia for the physical comforts which she has lost:

> This lipper ludge tak for thy burelie bour,
> And for thy bed tak now ane bunche of stro,
> For waillit wyne and meitis thou had tho,
> Tak mowlit breid, peirrie and ceder sour [...].
>
> (ll.438-41)

To MacQueen this demonstrates that 'Even now the appetitive reveals itself, as once again Cresseid remembers the food she had eaten in her "triumphand" past.' (*Robert Henryson*, p.87) Tillyard observes that

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1. On the Christian/secular debate over the *Testament*, see Dolores L. Noll, '*The Testament of Cresseid*: Are Christian Interpretations Valid?', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 9 (1971), no.1, 16-25, and Lee W. Patterson 'Christian and Pagan in *The Testament of Cresseid*', *Studies in Philology*, 52 (1973), 696-714.

2. E.M.W. Tillyard, *Five Poems: 1470-1870* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p.17.

Cresseid's bequeathing of her corpse 'With wormis and taidis to be rent' (l.578) recalls the *contemptus mundi* topos and indicates the 'otherworldly morality' of the poem[3]. Denton Fox describes Cresseid's moral progress as one where she 'begins to repent and to spurn earthly love' and argues that 'Christianity and the condemnation of earthly love are clearly enough implicit in the end of the *Testament*.'[4] He suggests, rather indecisively, that Diana, to whom Cresseid leaves her spirit, is to be equated with 'the Trinity or with the divine essence', or that at any rate 'Diana is a fairly obvious surrogate for God - or possibly for the Virgin Mary, with whom she was sometimes compared.'[5] Whichever of Fox's alternatives one opts for, the message is that Cresseid has repudiated her 'excessive desire for earthly safety and comfort', and that the poem concludes with a condemnation of such worldly concerns[6]. The viewpoints of Tillyard, Fox, and MacQueen leave little room for any positive appreciation of earthly pleasure or regret at its loss. Any evaluation of the action based on such sentiments is seen as 'a worldliness of moral judgement' based on 'false standards' which Cresseid herself has rejected[7].

This privileging of spiritual values at the expense of more mundane concerns is also evident in Fox's account of the narrator's role in the poem. Fox argues that the poem's compassionate depiction of the earthly suffering and loss which Cresseid undergoes is significant only in so far as it reveals the deluded narrator's inability to perceive her culpability and the ultimate justice of her fate. The narrator's attitude is 'morally imbecilic', and 'stupidly and passionately involved'[8]. For Fox, the narrator's sympathy is evoked only to be dismissed as erroneous, a result of the sinfulness and folly which we all share with Cresseid:

> Henryson makes him [the narrator], like Cresseid herself, a figure who is both sympathetic and sinful, so that we must condemn him

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3. Tillyard, pp.24-5.
4. *The Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Denton Fox (London: Nelson, 1968), pp.56, 57.
5. Ibid., p.57n.
6. Ibid., pp.56-7.
7. MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, p.86.
8. Fox, ed., *Testament*, pp.56, 23. For a similar view of the narrator, see R.J. Lyall, *Narrative and Morality in Middle Scots Poetry* (PhD thesis: University of Glasgow, 1982), pp.188-89. See also Larry M. Sklute, 'Phebus Descending: Rhetoric and Moral Vision in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*', *English Literary History*, 44 (1977), 189-204 (pp.191-2, 197-202). Sklute, unlike Fox and Lyall, does not see the poem as exressing Christian optimism. He argues that the *Testament* expounds a dour, bleak, and ultimately unforgiving morality, in which any hope of salvation is withheld.

at the same time as we see him to be like us.

(p.55)

Construing an emotive response to human loss as evidence of concupiscence, Fox privileges approval of her spiritual regeneration at the expense of dismay at her physical decline and loss of temporal happiness. For him, as for Tillyard and MacQueen, to focus on the tragic worldly dimensions of the poem's action is to remain blind to the fact that Cresseid's fate has a purificatory and redemptive function within a benevolent providential order. Seen in terms of Cresseid's spiritual progress, the poem depicts not loss but gain, and the narrated events have been all for the good, making sorrow over them unnecessary and foolish.

These critics undoubtedly highlight significant aspects of the poem in terms of the providential implications of the narrative. But their dismissal of the narrator's sympathy, and of the poem's tragic secular dimensions, constitutes a serious neglect[9]. As Douglas Duncan has pointed out, the *Testament* depicts Cresseid's leprosy in a graphic manner which powerfully evokes horror and sympathy for her suffering. This aspect of the poem demands that Cresseid's fate be understood with reference to the human misery to which she finds herself exposed, and invites an appreciation of the positive value of the secular happiness which she has lost[10]. In diminishing the importance of the *Testament*'s secular emphasis, MacQueen, Fox, and Tillyard provide only a partial understanding of the poem.

Those critics inclined to view the *Testament* in secular terms are much more varied in their assessments of the poem than the Christianising critics. But they do display a common tendency to deny that it contains any metaphysical elements, insisting that its perspective is wholly worldly. C.W. Jentoft argues that 'Cresseid's sin is courtly, not Christian'. This view is shared by Dolores Noll, who affirms that the positive value which the poem attaches to the love of Troilus and Cresseid cannot be sustained within a Christian framework as it finds sexual

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9. MacQueen does refer to 'the pathos of Henryson's realism' in the recognition scene between Troilus and Cresseid (*Robert Henryson*, p.91), but his reading of the poem nowhere examines the positive significance of the poem's pathetic and realistic elements.

10. See Douglas Duncan, 'Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*', *Essays in Criticism*, 11 (1961), 128-35 (esp. p.129).

expression outwith marriage[11]. She argues that 'Henryson has created, for the purposes of this poem, a love universe which is both self-contained and eclectic. Its self-containment precludes a relationship to a larger, Christian world' (p.18). Neither Noll nor Jentoft pay much attention to the poem's accent on human suffering, preferring to emphasise its positive recommendation of the secular morality of courtly love. Other critics, however, assign the more negative aspects of the poem's tragic action a central role in defining its significance.

For A.C. Spearing, the significance of the *Testament* lies in the bare facts of decay and loss which it reveals:

> At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer is able to make the transition from earthly to heavenly love acceptable on at least an emotional level, because the love of Troilus and Criseyde has been presented as sharing the universal qualities of the love of God. But in Henryson's poem, by the very nature of his story, earthly love has no such qualities, and no positive alternative can be proposed. There is simply the grim warning - 'Your roising reid to rotting shall retour' (464) - and the casting off of illusion - 'Be war tharfoir, approichis neir your hour' (468). The pattern disclosed by the poem is in fact meaningless so far as any future action is concerned. From it can be deduced only that 'Fortoun is fikkil quhen scho beginnis and steiris' (469). [...] On such a view of reality, however strong the will to moralize, Cresseid's treachery and her death, once they have themselves been recounted, do leave nothing more to say.[12]

In this view the poem recommends no positive system of values, whether courtly or Christian: it simply displays 'the inescapable factuality of physical and mental anguish' (ibid., p.184). For Spearing, it is the poem's stress on the 'mere facts' of earthly misery which defines its significance, and which is the proper object of critical attention.

E. Duncan Aswell argues that the poem does indeed affirm a positive set of values, but he does not consider these to be based on any transcendent criteria:

> The narrator and Cresseid [...] both belong in a secular universe, not one in which Fortune is seen as an aspect of or partial and imperfect perspective upon divine providence, as Boethius or Gower would have emphasised. Henryson's planet-gods are immanent deities, natural forces, but their dominance is not shown to be counteracted through a belief in God.[13]

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11. C.W. Jentoft, 'Henryson as Authentic "Chaucerian": Narrator, Character and Courtly Love in *The Testament of Cresseid*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 10 (1974), 94-102 (p.100). Noll, 22-23.

12. A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, 2nd edn (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), pp.188-89.

13. E. Duncan Aswell, 'The Role of Fortune in *The Testament of Cresseid*', *Philological Quarterly*, 46 (1967), 471-87 (p.485).

The poem reveals Cresseid's actions to be folly and error, and opposes to them the steadfast love of Troilus who embodies a mode of behaviour which provides greatest freedom from the destructive power of Fortune (ibid., p.483). But the values attached to their actions derive solely from their capacity to promote human happiness in the face of the negative forces to which existence is naturally subject:

> Since our life consists wholly of impermanence, of dependence upon external conditions and internal states of mind that exist only to change, and since man has so little control over them, each man must strive to retain control over himself. In doing so, he at least adapts himself to Fortune, instead of fighting against her, and this, the poem demonstrates from beginning to end, is all that man can do.
>
> (Ibid., pp.486-7)

The judgements which the *Testament* presents are thus seen to be based on utilitarian rather than *a priori* grounds. For Aswell, as with Spearing, recognition of and sensitivity to the human suffering which results from Cresseid's actions is the central factor which should shape our assessment of them.

It is my contention that, while both the secular and Christianising perspectives on the *Testament* elucidate aspects of the poem, neither one of them gives a wholly adequate account. The *Testament* in fact defines the meaning of the events which it depicts in both secular *and* providential terms, authorising the perspectives of both sides of the modern critical debate while at the same time exceeding the narrow strictures of either. As will be argued below, the poem certainly invites an idealising mode of judgement, encouraging one to understand Cresseid's actions and fate in terms of the *a priori* moral law whereby their significance is determined with reference to the metaphysical opposition of *voluptas* and *caritas*. But at the same time the stress on the stark factuality of human suffering invites a pragmatically-defined mode of understanding, in which the worldly implications of human actions are assigned a central role in determining the values attached to them. Henryson seeks to reconcile an idealising mode of judgement with one in which circumstantial criteria are paramount, aiming to overcome the tension between these perspectives which appears in fables such as 'The Two Mice'. The secular and Christianising critics, in proffering readings which privilege one of these perspectives at the expense of the other, have

seriously misrepresented a text whose structure is not exclusory but comprehensive.

That the *Testament* contains multiple levels of significance has already been suggested by Robert L. Kindrick, who observes that in the Middle Ages, 'The integration of varieties of interpretation throughout the narrative of an entire text was a generally accepted exegetical principle.'[14] Moreover, defining these levels of meaning according to the fourfold Biblical exegetical schema, Kindrick proposes that one level posits a localised significance and the other a universal one:

> Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* seems to be constructed basically at the level of the *sensus historicus* and the *sensus tropologicus*. [...] By modern aesthetic standards, the poem is hardly vulnerable to criticism for working at both levels. In fact it might be praised for its relative modernity.
>
> (p.207)

The *Testament*, however, departs from the traditional medieval conception of the multi-layered text in the nature of the relation which Henryson establishes between the different levels of his poem. The secular and metaphysical levels of meaning in the *Testament* are organised in a pattern of ironic juxtaposition which leads to violent and destabilising disjunctions between them. This sets Henryson apart from his Scholastic forebears for whom the diverse *sententiae* which can be ascribed to a text are all validated through their participation in the divine Word. Departing from this affirmation of authority, Henryson organises his poem in such a way as to accentuate the deficiencies of the meanings which it posits. The different levels of significance call each other into question, each highlighting what the other excludes while remaining deficient in itself. It is this disjunctive structure which underlies the lack of contact between the different modern critical assessments of the *Testament*.

The rest of this chapter will examine the interaction of the different levels of significance in the *Testament*. It will be demonstrated that the poem is structured in a manner which aims to resolve the tension between modes of judgement based on circumstantial and absolute criteria. Henryson seeks to produce a mode of representation adequate to fulfil both the affective and idealising imperatives of Scholastic literary theory, permitting meaning to be adapted to take

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14. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, p.204.

account of particular circumstances while retaining a sense of its transcendent basis. The disjunctive organisation of the poem's secular and providential levels of significance produces an ironic structure which operates according to the pattern proposed by H.E. Tolliver in his 'From *Moralitas* to Irony', being aimed to register and address the tensions between these perspectives in order to embrace and comprehend them (see above, Ch.3, p.105). In attempting to resolve the interpretative problems which he faces, Henryson develops a mode of signification which remains heavily indebted to the assumptions and imperatives of Scholastic literary theory while radically modifying that theory through a flexible and creative deployment of its resources.

2

The first indications in the *Testament* that the events depicted therein are to be understood in both secular and spiritual terms appear in the narrator's opening comments on Cresseid:

> O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se
> Of Troy and Greece, how was thow fortunait
> To change in filth all thy femininitie,
> And be with fleschelie lust sa maculait,
> And go amang the Greikis air and lait,
> Sa gigotlike takand thy foull plesance!
> I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!
> (ll.78-84)

The narrator's use of terms such as 'filth' and 'maculait' implies a recognition of Cresseid's debased condition. The reference to her contamination with 'fleschelie lust' indicates that her actions are here being seen as innately corrupt in the light of an absolute moral law. Yet the narrator's awareness of Cresseid's sinfulness does not result in mere condemnation. His consideration of her behaviour concludes with a reaction of pity.

The narrator's pitying outlook is one which gives priority to material considerations in evaluating human actions. Cresseid is described at the outset of the narrative with a stress on the sorrowful temporal consequences of her actions: 'wofull end' (l.69), 'quhat distres scho thoillit' (l.70), 'destitute / Off all comfort and consolatioun' (ll.92-3). The stress here is on the fact that Cresseid's behaviour has resulted in her isolation from human society and in temporal misery. The narrator's

compassion is thus based on a sense of the value of what she has lost or thrown away. This attention to the significance which Cresseid's actions accrue in their worldly ramifications differs from and balances those aspects of the narrator's comments which stress their intrinsic depravity.

As noted above, critics such as Denton Fox and R.J. Lyall have argued that the narrator's pity is steeped in concupiscence and that his prioritising of the concrete significance of Cresseid's actions is to be rejected. The narrator's perspective is considered to entail a worldliness of judgement which obstructs his perception of either Cresseid's initial sin, or the positive implications of her subsequent fate, as both are viewed with an eye to their corporeal rather than spiritual significance. The narrator's sensual outlook leads him to deny Cresseid's responsibility for her own actions by ascribing her debased condition to the workings of Fortune and denying that she is to be blamed for them. This is a view which appears to be supported by aspects of the narrator's characterisation which establish a parallel between him and Cresseid. At the outset of the poem the narrator is, like Cresseid, a devotee of Venus who seeks the perpetuation of worldly pleasure:

> For I traistit that Venus, lufis quene,
> To quhome sum tyme I hecht obedience,
> My faidit hart of lufe scho wald mak grene,
> And therupon with humbill reuerence
> I thocht to pray hir hie magnificence;
> Bot for greit cald as then I lattit was
> And in my chalmer to the fyre can pas.
> (ll.22-28)

The past tenses of 'traistit' and 'thocht', and the phrase 'sum tyme' suggest that at the time of writing the narrator's faith in Venus has been shaken. In this he parallels Cresseid's outlook in her accusation against the gods:

> O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow
> And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddes!
> *3*e causit me alwayis vnderstand and trow
> The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
> And ay grew grene throw *3*our supplie and grace.
> Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane,
> And I fra luifferis left, and all forlane.
> (ll.136-42)

The imagery of verdure being slain by frost in this passage echoes the narrator's desire that 'my faidit hart of lufe scho wald mak grene', and the thwarting of this wish as he is driven from his oratory by the cold.

The frost and cold symbolise the natural processes of decay to which all sensual pleasure is prone, as is indicated by the wintry imagery employed in the poem's depiction of Saturn, who is a conventional figure of time (ll.155-68). The permanence which both the narrator and Cresseid expect from sensual pleasures is based on a failure to understand that such pleasures are by their very nature ephemeral. Craig McDonald's observation on Cresseid can thus be extended to include the narrator:

> Cresseid, like Boethius (II, Prose 1), is being punished for committing a fatal error of judgement, the failure to recognise her own mortality. She has placed herself in the hands of a variable goddess and has expected her fortune to remain stable.[15]

These parallels seem to confirm the view that the narrator shares Cresseid's sensual outlook and is thus disposed to be lenient towards her, minimising the seriousness of her sin and shifting responsibility for her predicament onto Fortune[16].

This argument, however, oversimplifies the narrator's attitude towards Cresseid, in which a censorious recognition of her inherent moral degradation is conjoined with a sense of pity, rather than displaced by it. The narrator's recognition of the essential impurity of Cresseid's condition, and his disapproval of her 'fleschelie lust', are irreconcilable with the claim that he remains concupiscently ignorant of the precepts of the universal moral law. The possibility remains, of course, that his attitude is confused, being divided between two incompatible attitudes. But it is not clearly established that his pity does in fact conflict with those aspects of his remarks which betoken a recognition of Cresseid's sinfulness. The suggestion that his sympathy leads him to deny Cresseid's responsibility for her own actions and predicament, placing the blame instead on Fortune, is not borne out by the text. As E. Duncan Aswell points out, the narrator's opening comments on Cresseid's situation express an ambivalent understanding of the nature of Fortune, mixing passive and active verbs ('was [...] fortunait', 'change', 'be [...] maculait', 'go', 'takand', 'fall') in a manner which suggests that '"Fortune" may be a wholly external force predetermining human events arbitrarily, or it may be the manifestation of an individual's own freely chosen preferences and inclinations.' (Aswell, p.473) The narrator's hedging over this issue may indeed suggest an unwillingness to take responsibility for

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15. Craig McDonald, 'Venus and the Goddess Fortune in *The Testament of Cresseid*', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 4 (1977), no.2, 14-24 (p.16).

16. See Fox, ed., *Testament*, pp.49-55; Lyall, *Narrative and Morality*, pp.187-89.

moral failings of his own which he sees mirrored in Cresseid. But there is nothing to indicate that his compassion is uniquely associated with either of the views of Fortune which the stanza proposes.

Where the narrator does present Cresseid as a victim of Fortune, it is not her actions which he is defending, but her posthumous reputation:

> I sall excuse als far forth as I may
> Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes,
> The quhilk fortoun hes put to sic distres
> As hir pleisit, and nathing throw the gilt
> Of the - throw wickit langage to be spilt.[17]
> (ll.87-91)

The narrator does not wholly deny the appropriateness of Cresseid's denunciation at the hands of posterity. He vindicates her reputation only as far as he may, which again indicates his awareness that some degree of blame is warranted. What he excuses from condemnation is not Cresseid's infidelity, but her praiseworthy qualities which he insists should not be overlooked in a sweeping denigration of her character. This aspect of the narrator's sympathy thus reflects only on the justness of Cresseid's wholesale loss of reputation. It has no bearing whatsoever on the question of her responsibility for her actions, and involves no denial of their disconsonance with the moral law. Again, pity co-exists with a due recognition of sinfulness. While the parallels between the narrator and Cresseid certainly suggest that his own conduct is dominated by merely carnal concerns, there is no evidence that his pity for Cresseid is to be identified as a product of those concerns, any more than is his censure of her.

Other aspects of the poem assign the narrator's pity for Cresseid a significance which severely problematises the view that it is merely an index of his carnal outlook. The 'pietie' expressed by the narrator in l.84 of the poem is a pun: the word designates both pity and piety. This point is underscored by the fact that Troilus, whose constancy and gentility provide a structural contrast to Cresseid's flawed nature, is himself described as feeling 'knichtlie pietie' (l.519) when stirred to his generous act of charity by the recollection of Cresseid which the sight of her deformed visage provokes. This associates pity with the very virtues which are opposed in the poem to the vices of both Cresseid and the

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17. For a reading of these lines as blaming Fortune for Cresseid's actions and subsequent plight, see Lyall, *Narrative and Morality*, p.187.

narrator. The connection between the narrator's pity and the attitudes of Troilus is further underscored when Cresseid tells us that in his general regard for women, Troilus defended their reputation: 'helpit thair opinioun' (l.557). Troilus' behaviour thus recalls the narrator's desire to protect Cresseid from the defamation of posterity. Indeed, as Troilus' pity and virtue are manifested in an act of charity, 'pietie', far from being a product of sensuality, becomes thematically associated with the 'cheritie', or *caritas*, with which the narrator closes the poem (l.612). This suggests that the narrator's sympathetic attitude towards Cresseid is much more than merely a product of his flawed vision, to be displaced by a morally sound understanding. The semantic and thematic connections which the poem establishes indicate that his pity, for all its secular orientation, is not only compatible with the higher ideal of *caritas*, but may in fact be an essential aspect of it.

Those aspects of the poem's opening which draw a parallel between the narrator's sensual preoccupations and Cresseid's outlook certainly raise doubts about the underlying motivation for his pity. But while these parallels may problematise the precise status of his compassion, they are far from establishing that it is definitely to be construed as concupiscence. Indeed, the punning implications of 'pietie' suggest that an understanding of Cresseid's actions which preserves the dominance of the absolute moral law may not be incompatible with one which attends to contingent circumstance, but that they can and should co-exist harmoniously. The narrator's attitude towards Cresseid thus highlights the difficulty of reconciling worldly-orientated and spiritually-orientated perspectives, and at the same time suggests the possibility of a mode of judgement which can combine both perspectives.

In the opening sections of the *Testament* the terms in which worldly-orientated and idealising levels of judgement might be deemed compatible are left unclear. But their conjunction is decisively established in the transformation in the narrator's outlook between the beginning and end of the poem, and in the advice which he consequently offers to his female audience in the final stanza. As noted above, the opening depiction of the narrator as a devotee of Venus indicates that, whatever may be said of his attitude towards Cresseid, his concerns in his own life have been dominated by sensuality. At the close of the poem, however, his position has changed significantly:

> Now, worthie wemen, in this ballet schort,
> Maid for *3*our worschip and instructioun,
> Of cheritie, I monische and exhort,
> Ming not *3*our lufe with fals deceptioun [...].
> (ll.610-13)

The key word here is 'cheritie', which establishes a contrast between the narrator's initial devotion to Venus and his final disposition. The narrator's perspective has shifted from his original concern with *voluptas* towards a mode of understanding founded in *caritas*.

The importance of the term 'cheritie' in the poem is underscored by the syntactic ambiguity of this closing passage. 'Cheritie' may be viewed as the theme of the poem ('this ballet schort [...] Of cheritie'), as an attribute of the poet ('Maid [...] Of cheritie'), as an attribute of the narrator ('Of cheritie, I monische'), or as a quality to be desired in the female audience ('Of cheritie [...] ming not *3*our lufe with fals deceptioun').[18] The emphasis placed on 'cheritie' in the *Testament*, and its opposition to the narrator's initial concern with *voluptas*, is a strong indicator that the poem exposes the limitations and dangers of a merely carnal outlook on the world and aims to inculcate an understanding of temporal reality in terms of transcendent spiritual values. Yet the transformation in the narrator's outlook does not lead him to dismiss earthly love. The narrator's closing counsel to his female audience in the spirit of 'cheritie' is merely 'ming not *3*our lufe with fals deceptioun' (l.613). As R.J. Lyall points out, 'the final stanza counsels fidelity, not celibacy' (*Narrative and Morality*, p.211). The narrator's recommendation of fidelity in human love, in accordance with the courtly ethos, presents it as a mode of behaviour which brings one's life into conformity with the virtue of *caritas*.

Moreover, the closing exhortation permits the value of such conduct to be understood in terms of both its universal resonances and its actual implications. That the *Testament* proffers a metaphysically-justified recommendation of fidelity, positing a relation of harmony between courtly love and divine love, has already been suggested by critics who adopt a Christianising view of the poem. Tillyard observes that 'the code of Love could in its way co-operate with the code of the Church, even preparing its devotees for a transfer of allegiance'. He cites Malory's remark, on Guenever's having become a nun, that she 'was a

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18. See Lyall, *Narrative and Morality*, pp.184-85.

true lover, and therefore she had a good end'[19]. A similar point has been made by John MacQueen, who affirms that Henryson

> treats the courtly love relationship, and the religion of love, as types or allegories of relationships which in themselves are seen and judged in terms of Christian morality.
>
> (*Robert Henryson*, p.63)

Dolores Noll argues against this view, claiming that, while the poem establishes an ideal of human love represented by Troilus' fidelity to Cresseid, the illicitly sexual nature of the love between them makes this incompatible with medieval Christian morality. This, however, misrepresents both the *Testament* and the morality to which she refers. The sexual nature of Troilus and Cresseid's relationship, evident in Chaucer's *Troilus*, is not mentioned at all by Henryson. And, after all, 'Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew'. Henryson's emphasis is on Troilus' fidelity to Cresseid as the defining feature of his relationship with her: he pays no heed to what physical expression their love might take.

Moreover, even if one grants the illicitly sexual nature of Troilus and Cresseid's relationship, this does not nullify the ideal value of the love which can, and on Troilus' part does, accompany such a relationship. Medieval Christian morality is not as inflexible as Noll suggests. Aquinas, it should be remembered, defines evil as an imperfect participation in good, and observes that since good and being are convertible, all acts must have some degree of goodness[20]. This, combined with Aquinas' subtle awareness of how acts can be categorised as good in some respects and as evil in others, should provide a check to any assumption that Christian moralists can only respond to sin with a sweeping and absolute judgement[21]. While the sexual form of Troilus' love for Cresseid may, in Aquinas' terms, compromise the goodness of his relationship with her considered as a complete and particular act, leading it to be classified as sinful, this neither erases all trace of goodness from their relationship, nor makes it sinful in every facet. The positive value of Troilus' fidelity as an informing force on their relationship (and this is the aspect of the relationship on which Henryson chooses to focus), whatever form it may take, retains an essential integrity.

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19. See Tillyard, pp.13-15 (p.14).
20. See *ST*, I-II, xviii, 1, resp.
21. See above, Ch.3, p.137, n.35.

Moreover, despite Noll's claim that 'Malory's comment about Guenever seems insufficient to carry the point' (p.22), Henryson is in fact drawing on well-established late-medieval tradition in presenting a harmonious relationship between earthly and divine love. Dante's Beatrice provides one obvious parallel:

> For some years I sustained him with my looks;
> Showing my youthful eyes to him,
> I led him in the right direction.
>
> (*Purg.*, Canto XXX, ll.121-3)

Beatrice presents Dante's human love for her as an ennobling force which can lead to higher levels of love. While still limited and far from being an end in itself, it nevertheless remains in harmony with divine love, and retains its relative validity as a lower form operating in concert with it. Similarly, in *The Kingis Quair* a dove appears to James I as a symbol of both divine grace and of his lady's mercy, combining divine and secular love in a single image[22]. The faithful love of Troilus for Cresseid, and Cresseid's recognition of the value of that love, can thus quite legitimately be interpreted as being consonant with divine love[23].

This consonance is indicated in Cresseid's recognition of the value of Troilus' love for her, which is accompanied by a new awareness of the transience of the pleasures she sought and of her own guilt in giving herself over to the whims of fortune. The poem's structure, whereby adversity leads to Cresseid's perceiving the true nature of the pleasures to which she has dedicated herself and her own culpability for having 'clam vpon the fickill quehill sa hie' (l.550) is recognisably Boethian. The deleterious effects of fortune are shown to operate within a broader providential scheme whereby they reveal the true nature of the temporal things in which Cresseid has placed her faith and reveal the erroneousness of that faith[24]. Yet Cresseid's perception of the ephemerality of the pleasures she sought does not lead to a rejection of earthly love as a thing of no value. Rather, it leads her to a deeper appreciation of the faithful love which she had rejected:

> 'Thy lufe, thy lawtie, and thy gentilnes
> I countit small in my prosperitie,

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22. *The Kingis Quair*, 179-85.
23. See Erwin Panofsky's observations on ideas about love in the Middle Ages in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp.98-103.
24. See McDonald, 'Venus and Fortune', pp.19-20.

> Sa efflated I was in wantones,
> And clam vpun the fickill quehill sa hie [...]'
> (ll.547-50)

That Troilus' love should be thus valued at the very point where Cresseid recognises the transience of sensual pleasures clearly suggests that it is seen to be of a more permanent and enduring nature, less prone to the vicissitudes of Fortune, than the lust to which she gives herself over. Cresseid in fact expressly contrasts the sensual nature of her inclinations which make her mind '"in fleschelie foull affectioun / [...] inclynit to lustis lecherous"' (l.558-8) with the noble love of Troilus, implying that the latter is more than merely sensual.

The contrast which Cresseid draws between her own dedication to sensuality and the virtue of Troilus strongly indicates that her recognition of the positive value of fidelity is morally congruent with the narrator's final rejection of *voluptas* and recognition of the merit of *caritas*. The fact that it is Troilus' own act of charity to the lepers which leads to Cresseid's perception of the worth of his steadfast love strengthens this thematic connection between her final position and that of the narrator. Rather than presenting a stark opposition between human love and divine love, the *Testament* distinguishes two forms of human love: one which is merely concerned with the pursuit of sensual pleasure, and another more spiritual form, the steadfast nature of which shadows and participates in the eternal and unchanging nature of the divine. The poem assigns faithful human love its own relative validity defined within an evaluative framework whose approbatory reference, while metaphysically-grounded, nevertheless encompasses both secular and spiritual undertakings.

The validity which secular love receives through its shadowing of divine love, however, still prioritises transcendent reference as the governor of signification: the value of human love, while displayed on the level of particular existence, is seen to derive from an essential nature which remains wholly external to and independent of actual context. Similarly, the destruction of temporal happiness depicted in the poem appears in these terms as a consequence of the distance from the stability of the divine which results from sin. The worldly-orientated aspects of the *Testament*, however, invite one to view the worldly suffering which Cresseid undergoes as much more than an index of the iniquity of her actions. The poem's stark evocation of human misery invites value-

judgements which, rather than being dominated by metaphysical considerations, involve a pragmatic cognisance of the material implications of the different conducts of Troilus and Cresseid.

Hence, the narrator's closing remarks, while signalling the metaphysically-grounded value which fidelity derives from its participation in *caritas*, also invite the female audience to view its value in worldly terms. His urging them to 'Beir in *3*our mynd this sore conclusion / Of fair Cresseid' (ll.614-15) invokes the desire to avoid temporal misery such as hers as a major motivation for embracing fidelity. That the poem should conclude on such a note, inviting consideration of Cresseid's 'sore conclusion', makes nonsense of those interpretations which suggest that Cresseid's spiritual growth should lead one to transcend concern over her material loss, and that the poem should be seen as wholly positive in its depiction of her fate. The impression of misery which the *Testament* creates is in fact of irreducible importance to the poem's moral structure. The powerful and sympathetic rendering of the factuality of human misery in the *Testament* demands that the tragic consequences which ensue from Cresseid's actions should in themselves be taken as a key factor in evaluating those actions. The poem recommends virtuous love in terms which balance an awareness of its shadowing of divine love with a sense of its pragmatic value in promoting secular happiness. Henryson analyses the morality of human actions both in terms of their relation to the universal moral law and in terms of their particular ramifications on a human level, affirming a harmonious relation between the two.

The pragmatic dimension of the value placed on courtly love in the *Testament* is evident in Cresseid's warning to lovers that they should be wary of fickleness such as hers. Cresseid condemns such fickleness not only as a concupiscent priveleging of the temporal over the eternal, or of the appetitive over the rational, but also as a mode of behaviour which destroys the worldly ideal of true mutual love and the terrestrial happiness which it brings. Hence she warns lovers not of the general instability of earthly love, but of the difficulty of finding steadfast love reciprocated: 'I lat *3*ou wit, thair is richt few thairout / Quhome *3*e may traist to haue trew lufe agane' (ll.563-4). From this perspective, it is in terms of the destruction of the temporal happiness provided by faithful love that actions such as Cresseid's are to be condemned, and it is in

fostering such happiness that the value of faithful love is established. Cresseid's final recognition that in her betrayal of Troilus, and of the values which he embodies, she has thrown away the possibility of temporal happiness works in concert with the poem's stark and humane depiction of the earthly suffering and loss which she consequently endures. The *Testament* invites a positive evaluation of faithful human love which prioritises its secular implications and complements the idealising focus on its transcendently-defined significance: the text's metaphysical dimensions provide an absolute basis for the poem's value-judgements, while its worldly focus grounds those judgements in the concrete reality of human life.

The multi-layered significance of the *Testament* is thus designed to make room for a sensitive concretising understanding of human actions without losing sight of the absolute basis of moral judgement, harmonising the two within a framework where the totality of an action's significance is defined with reference both to its universal and its particular resonances. The poem constructs a system of contrasts and relations between merely sensual lust, faithful human love, and the divine love of *caritas*, within which the implications of an action with regard to worldly happiness reflect that action's consonance or disconsonance with the moral law. This structure permits a perspectival flexibility whereby actions may be evaluated in terms which foreground either their secular or their spiritual significance. The alternative emphases proffer distinct but complementary perspectives on a mode of conduct that brings one's life into conformity with the moral law, and their differing criteria of judgement unite in commonly encouraging one to embrace such conduct. The *Testament* thus endorses Troilus' fidelity and discommends Cresseid's licentiousness in terms which permit their conduct to be understood both in idealising terms and according to the significance which it acquires through its worldly ramifications.

This structure has a number of implications with regard to Henryson's deployment of the resources of Scholastic literary theory. His continuing commitment to the protocols and imperatives of Scholasticism is evident in the distinction in the *Testament*'s final stanza of discrete levels of significance which inculcate the moral value of fidelity in terms appropriate to different types of reader. The elderly narrator arrives at an understanding of the poem's action which, as his closing exhortation

makes clear, is couched in terms of the metaphysical opposition of *voluptas* and *caritas*. The 'worthie wemen' whom he addresses are encouraged towards an understanding based on concrete sensible grounds. The poem caters to both modes of understanding, with each level of significance recommending in a different way a mode of behaviour which brings one's life into harmony with the universal order. In this respect Henryson's poem permits its audience to approach a simple virtue in different ways, according to what is appropriate for their circumstances and level of understanding[25]. Simple universally valid moral standards are received according to different modes of understanding which are determined by the particular contexts in which these values are being applied. In thus catering for different readerly perspectives, Henryson continues the ethical imperative of Scholastic theory. Alistair Minnis' observation that in medieval literary thought, 'A single text can have different kinds of meaning, depending on the kind of reader, or the kind of reading in which the reader is engaged at a given time.' (*Authorship*, p.*xvi*) is as applicable to Henryson's *Testament* as it is to the exegetical practices of academic Scholasticism.

It must also be noted, however, that Henryson's relation to the ideas of his Scholastic forebears here is again a modificatory one. While Henryson provides his text with multiple levels of significance in order to cater to the different conditions of his readership, his use of this structure has very different implications from what had been traditionally the case in academic Scholasticism. These implications can be demonstrated by comparing the structure of the *Testament* with Auerbach's brief definition of the term *figura* towards the end of *Mimesis*:

> In this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now.[26]

Auerbach rightly adds that this generally leads in the Middle Ages to a view wherein the temporal significance of occurrences, whereby they are understood according to their place within a chronological or causal

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25. It is on this level that a reading of the poem as anti-feminist would have to proceed. The parallels between the initial conditions of the narrator and Cresseid undermine any simple identification of women with sensuality and fickleness as opposed to male rationality and stability (see Noll, p.24). The final stanza, however, does reproduce a traditionally gendered distiction between sensible and intelligible modes of understanding.

26. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p.555.

scheme, 'is of secondary importance, and often their interpretation can dispense with any knowledge of it.'[27] The framework which Auerbach describes, however, involves the distinction of discrete levels of significance so that an occurrence signifies both on the level of its concrete reality and according to its resonance within the divine plan. It is certainly true, as Auerbach states, that medieval Christian thinkers perceived 'an antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning', and that figural exegesis permitted them to view an event's meaning as primarily defined within a transcendent and atemporal framework (pp.48-9). But the distinction of discrete levels of reference which such exegesis involves also provides the potential for a mode of understanding which can conjoin this idealising perspective with attention to an event's significance in terms of its sensible reality[28].

It is precisely this potential which is developed in the *Testament of Cresseid*. Henryson moves beyond the widespread medieval sense of an 'antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning', and in doing so he departs from the tendency in Scholastic exegesis to privilege universal norms *per simplice* as the proper object of readerly attention. The *Testament* is orientated towards the actual as much as towards the ideal: it aims to give the fullest sense that Cresseid's actions are reprehensible not merely in metaphysical terms, in so far as they are out of harmony with the moral law, but also in tragic terms, in that they result in human misery. In this respect, Henryson's poem departs from Averroes' conception of literary signification as being dominated by the universal overtones of human actions and beliefs which make them honest, praiseworthy, and beatifying, and as primarily directing the gaze towards those aspects of human existence which render it 'important, normative, definitional, connected with the eternal fitness of things.' (*Ethical Poetic*, p.30) The secular focus of the *Testament* certainly works in concert with this universalising emphasis, recommending a mode of conduct whose ultimate justification lies in its consonance with the moral law. But the poem's stress on the human suffering and loss to which Cresseid's actions lead gives the actions of both her and Troilus a pragmatic significance which, while not separate from that which inheres in them absolutely, is

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27. Ibid. See also pp.73-6.
28. Dante's *Commedia* is the clearest literary example of such uses of *figura*. See Singleton, 'The Irreducible Dove', and 'Dante's Allegory' (esp. pp.95-6).

certainly distinct from it. The *Testament* delineates the worldly consequences of human actions as more than merely instrumental aids to an understanding of the universal overtones of those actions. It presents them as a legitimate focus of attention in their own right, permitting simple moral norms to be evaluated not merely in terms of their intrinsic rightness, their fittedness with the eternal order of things, but also in terms of the material consequences which ensue from their application in actual circumstances.

Henryson's literary innovations in the *Testament* are aimed at addressing and resolving the tension between the idealising and affective emphases of Scholastic literary theory. They facilitate a mode of representation capable of sensitively taking account of the concrete circumstances which circumscribe an action without compromising the certitude which derives from reference to *a priori* moral norms. As in 'The Two Mice', Henryson responds to the affective imperative of Scholastic theory by developing a mode of representation in which the significance of incidents and characters can be defined within a framework of contingent relations, thus enabling a mode of moral judgement which is capable of taking account of the concrete circumstances which circumscribe human actions. Furthermore, in harmonising this mode of signification with one based on reference to moral absolutes, Henryson offsets the radical undermining of authority which, in 'The Two Mice', was seen to result from a circumstantially-orientated mode of representation. The *Testament*'s alternative levels of significance can be reconciled when understood as perspectives on an action's total significance in which both are encompassed and validated.

The *Testament* thus illustrates the extent to which Henryson's innovative literary strategies are motivated by his commitment to the conflicting imperatives of Scholastic literary theory and his desire to see them reconciled. Furthermore, the protocols provided by Scholastic theory, in providing for the organisation of disparate levels of textual significance within a comprehensive framework, are what make possible the resolution of this conflict which the poem's balancing of realist and idealising modes of signification proposes. Henryson produces significant innovations and departures from medieval norms through his creative engagement with traditional materials and concerns. As Robert L. Kindrick affirms, Henryson is a 'transitional figure' who 'incorporates

medieval ideas in ways not likely envisioned by the originators of the traditions on which he draws.'[29]

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So far, this chapter has concentrated on Henryson's attempt to affirm a positive mode of ethical judgement in the *Testament*: a moral vision capable of resolving the uncertainties which result from the tension between the affective and idealising imperatives which he inherits from Scholastic thought on literature. Yet the complementary relation between the different levels of significance distinguished in the *Testament*, whereby the validity of each is affirmed, is only clearly established towards the close of the poem. The poem's harmonising of its different perspectives is reached only after a bewildering juxtaposition of worldly and transcendent modes of judgement in which each destabilises the authority of the other and reflects critically on the criteria according to which it is established. The *Testament*'s disjunctive organisation thus delineates the inadequacies as well as the virtues of its secular and metaphysical emphases.

Henryson's diffraction of a comprehensive vision into distinct partial perspectives is not only a means of catering for different readerly requirements, or of simply reconciling the tension between the affective and idealising axes of Scholastic theory. It is also a means of registering and addressing the fact that a sense of this tension still exists as a considerable problem in late-medieval thought, always producing the temptation to resolve it by privileging an absolutist perspective over one orientated towards temporal contingencies, or vice-versa. The proposed resolution of this tension in the *Testament* does not lead Henryson to overlook the fact that it remains a powerful tendency in his intellectual environment, or to think that he can readily dismiss or minimise the danger of the temptation which it presents. His literary strategy in the *Testament* can be thought of as a pre-emptive action against such temptation: the poem distinguishes a secular and a metaphysical perspective, setting these against each other in order to expose the limitations of both and show that each requires the complementary balance of the other.

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29. *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, p.273.

The tendency of the *Testament*'s two levels of significance to displace each other rather than harmonise is manifest in the poem's narrative structure. The narrative sequence delineates Cresseid's gradual and enforced detachment from the world. Initially depicting her as 'destitute / Of all comfort and consolatioun', passing from the town 'Richt priuelie, but fellowschip or refute' (ll.93-4), the poem proceeds to show her loss of the consolation found in her father's house as she finds herself exiled to a marginalised existence among the lepers. Her alienation from the world is completed in her death. That this narrative sequence permits both spiritual and secular perspectives on its significance is neatly emblematised in the final words of Cresseid's 'Testament', where she announces that 'My spreit I leif to Diane, quhair scho dwellis, / To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis.' (l.587-88) The term 'waist' can mean 'familiar'. This reading authorises the Christianising interpretation of the poem. When understood in spiritual terms, situating Cresseid's fate within the *a priori* opposition of *voluptas/caritas*, the narrative sequence delineates a process of moral regeneration. Cresseid, when in her father's home, remains distanced in her sensual outlook from a correct understanding of the metaphysical order of the universe and her own place within it. Her 'Complaint' (ll.407-69) shows that when exiled among the lepers she arrives at a partial illumination in her perception of the necessarily ephemeral nature of merely sensual pleasures, though still remaining evasive as to her own responsibility for her fate in having actively embraced the impermanence of which she complains[30]. At the poem's close she finally grasps her own moral culpability and spiritual deficiency in having rejected Troilus and given herself over to sensuality. This arrival at a mode of understanding in tune with the moral law, and with the metaphysical ordering of reality in which that law is based, is immediately followed by her departure from secular life. To construe 'waist' as 'familiar' is to view the narrative as depicting an optimistic movement towards a spiritual homecoming which ends the spiritual exile in which Cresseid's initial moral disposition had placed her.

The word 'waist', however, can also mean 'desolate'. The latter reading highlights the negative direction of the poem's action, focusing on

30. On Cresseid's moral evasiveness at this point, see C. David Benson, 'Troilus and Cresseid in Henryson's *Testament*', *Chaucer Review* 13 (1978-79), 263-71 (p.268).

Cresseid's progressive dislocation from the world of human comforts. It implies a grief over this alienation which is far from any simple *contemptus mundi* attitude. This reading responds positively to the sympathy with which Cresseid's plight is depicted and to the graphic emphasis on her physical decay, both of which invite one to respond to the narrative in literalistic, worldly terms, considering it as a portrayal of degradation and human loss. The movement of the poem's narrative, then, can be seen equally in terms of 'a worldliness of moral judgement' which views it in tragic terms, or of an 'otherworldly morality' which views it optimistically as a spiritual regeneration. The narrative invites and sustains both readings.

These two perspectives on the narrative, however, sit uncomfortably together. Their relationship is one of contrapuntal tension rather than harmonious concordance, as the narrative sequence simultaneously delineates spiritual progress and temporal decay. The oppositional character of the different modes of judgement, whereby the narrative movement presumed on one level is reversed on the other, problematises their reconciliation, suggesting that either can only be sustained by supplanting the other. The contrapuntal organisation of the narrative thus produces a disjunctive interaction between the poem's secular and Christianising levels of significance, as the narrative authorises two distinct structurations which appear to be incompatible.

The structural tension which Henryson thus establishes between the *Testament*'s idealising and mundane levels of significance is augmented by other aspects of the poem, wherein the two modes of judgement destabilise each other in more precisely defined terms, heightening the interpretative difficulty by exposing each other's limitations so that neither can be taken as providing an adequate *sententia* on which the text can be closed. This is evident in Cresseid's first speech of any length in the poem, in which she accuses the planetary gods of having brought about the loss of worldly happiness which has left her 'forlane' (ll.126-40):

> '*3*e causit me alwayis vnderstand and trow
> The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
> And ay grew grene throe *3*our suppile and grace [...].'
> (ll.136-38)

Cresseid's expectation of permanent pleasure from necessarily transient things immediately invites one to view her sin as a mistaken and idolatrous privileging of the temporal over the divine. The Boethian overtones of this depiction of Cresseid construct her fault in terms of the *a priori* hierarchical oppositions of reason and the senses, the spirit and the flesh. At this point in the poem Troilus has not appeared and there is no indication of the later definition of the courtly ideal of fidelity as a mode of conduct which is good in both temporal and spiritual terms. Cresseid's attack on the gods, in associating her concern over the loss of temporal good with a sensual outlook which loses sight of the spiritual priorities necessary to true happiness, thus encourages the view that her distress over the loss of worldly pleasure is inherently erroneous, and that the poem is, as Tillyard suggests, expounding an 'otherworldly morality', in accordance with the *contemptus mundi* tradition[31].

The Boethian overtones of this passage are continued throughout the narrative in the depiction of the progress of Cresseid's moral understanding. Her development in fact directly parallels that of Boethius in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, as he is similarly led from a merely sensual perspective, through a recognition of the necessary ephemerality of temporal pleasures, to arrive at an understanding of the true good. Viewed from this perspective, the *Testament*'s contrapuntal narrative movement appears to be making the same point as is made by Philosophy in Boethius' *De Consolatione*, when she argues that bad fortune is the best kind as it demonstrates the ephemeral nature of temporal goods and directs one's gaze towards the true good which is God:

> Etenim plus hominibus reor aduersam quam prosperam prodesse fortunam. Illa enim semper specie felicitatis cum uidetur blanda, mentitur; haec semper uera est, cum se instabilim mutatione demonstrat. [...] Postremo felix a uero bona deuios blanditis trahit, aduersa plerumque ad uera bona reduces unco retrahit.
>
> (*De Cons.*, Bk II, Prose viii)

Cresseid's temporal misfortune thus appears as a blessing when considered in terms of its resonance within a framework of absolute moral essences, leading her to espouse a set of ethical values which are attuned to the metaphysical order of reality. Her enforced detachment from the things of this world is positively evaluated as a necessary stage

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31. Tillyard, pp.24-5.

in a progressive movement towards spiritual enlightenment and penitence.

These aspects of the poem reflect critically on its secular dimensions. While a worldly-orientated understanding of the *Testament* certainly produces a negative judgement on Cresseid's outlook and behaviour, that judgement is founded on a sense of the value of the earthly happiness which she has thrown away, and on a wish that things could have been otherwise. The poem's poignant and sympathetic depiction of human loss thus entails a sense of the positive worth of secular pleasure and an attitude of regret and protest at its passing. In this it appears to mirror Cresseid's discontent at the ordained order of things, along with her failure to view the passing of temporal good with the equanimity which its ephemeral nature and its subordination to the divine good seems to require. Similarly, in leading one to view the narrative as reaching a negative conclusion, such a focus on the pathos of Cresseid's tragedy seems unaware of the larger positive implications of the action, remaining inattentive to its spiritual dimensions whereby it is seen as the action of a benevolent providence. The poem's secular level of significance thus appears to remain steeped in the merely carnal outlook whose limits the poem's transcendent significance exposes.

Moreover, the *Testament*'s idealising perspective, in establishing an absolute basis for meaning, provides a certitude which is not forthcoming from a circumstantially-based mode of judgement. While the transcendent and worldly dimensions of the poem tend to displace each other, the sympathetic focus on the disastrous consequences of Cresseid's actions provides a secular affirmation of the value of faithful love which agrees with the metaphysical validation of the courtly ideal. But the poem's bleak depiction of temporal vicissitude undermines that affirmation, exposing the inadequacies of the terms on which it is founded. On a merely secular level, the poem's courtly morality can only be validated in terms of the pragmatism which E. Duncan Aswell sees in the poem. Henryson's emphasis on the facts of human pain and mutability in the *Testament* provides the key worldly justification for courtly love as an ethos which can provide some stability in life and shield one against the depredations of Fortune. But this accent also means that instead of presenting a confident statement of the positive

value of courtly love, the poem conveys an impression of the fragility of the happiness which it can provide[32].

This aspect of the poem is indicated in the negative character of the narrator's closing exhortation which points back to the narrative of Cresseid's fate so as to urge women to 'Ming not *3*our lufe with fals deceptioun' (l.613). Rather than emphasising the aesthetic and moral appeal of the decorous courtly *ethos* in itself, the poem weighs it against the vivid depiction of the chaos which ensues from its abandonment. The recommendation of positive secular values is thus haunted by an underlying negativity which is foregrounded in the analyses of Spearing and Aswell: fidelity in human love appears less as a vital and cohesive system of values than as an accommodation to harrowing circumstances, making virtue of necessity. The lingering sense of horror and pity which the *Testament* arouses combines with this negative imperative to ensure that the courtly love ethos appears in the poem not as a confident affirmation of positive values, but as an exigent adaptation to harsh circumstance, raised in the face of a universe dominated by forces inimical to happiness, and within which humanity remains frail and impotent. The sense of existential horror aroused by the *Testament*'s exposure of the fragility and hollowness of secularly-defined human values in the face of a hostile and indifferent universe reveals their deficiency, and invites one to find it supplied in the certitude and positive resolution of the poem's providential significance.

It must be noted, though, that while the spiritualising aspects of the poem contrast with and reflect negatively on its worldly emphasis, the process is not merely one-way. The sympathy for Cresseid's plight which is expressed by the narrator and evoked by the graphic depiction of her physical suffering makes the poem's spiritual significance appear as harsh and unfeeling. Its Boethian diffidence in the face of human misery seems insensitive to the anxieties and exigencies of temporal suffering, and neglectful of the virtues of concern over such matters. The priority of the metaphysical over the secular dimensions of the *Testament* is called

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32. This accounts for Noll and Jentoft's neglect of Henryson's accent on 'the inescapable factuality' of suffering (see above, p.181). Both attribute to Henryson's 'courtly-love universe' a self-sufficiency and internal coherence which gives its moral precepts an unquestioned legitimacy and normative force (see Noll, pp.18, 24; Jentoft, p.101). This emphasis is undermined by the negativity inherent in the poem's depiction of courtly love as a defence against the destructive forces which constantly threaten human happiness.

into question in precisely these terms in the depiction of the tribunal of the planetary gods. The nature and extent of the gods' jurisdiction are clearly defined in the poem. They have

> power of all thing generabill,
> To reull and steir be thair greit influence
> Wedder and wind, and coursis variabill [...].
> (ll.148-50)

The gods are representations of immanent influences which define the natural condition of the sublunary sphere, the world of impermanence and change. As such, their subjection of Cresseid to their judgement is a reaffirmation of the mutability which she denied in her complaint against Venus and Cupid. The judgement of the planet-gods on Cresseid, as E. Duncan Aswell argues, enacts the necessary consequence of Cresseid's misunderstanding of the natural order of secular life[33]: having failed to grasp its inevitable mutability and adjust her conduct and attitudes accordingly, she leaves herself entirely at the mercy of the deleterious effects of Fortune. That her fate is to be seen as a natural outcome of her actions is underscored by the fact that in the Middle Ages leprosy was commonly viewed as a venereal disease, thus appearing as corollary to her promiscuous actions rather than as an imposition from above[34].

This structure obviously lends itself to the *Testament*'s secular focus, which bases its negative assessment of Cresseid's actions on the negative consequences which necessarily ensue from them. The temporal processes over which the planetary gods hold sway, however, are not devoid of metaphysical significance. Leprosy, it must be noted, was not only viewed as a venereal disease. It was also seen as a divine judgement on sinners, as well as being a form of earthly purgatory which brought its sufferers closer to God[35]. Furthermore, the symbolic connections between Cresseid's leprosy, which leaves her 'ouirspred with spottis blak' (l.339), and her already 'maculait' spiritual condition, implies that the judgement on her is related to an immanent moral law, leprosy being the outward sign of her inward state. This introduces another level of reference to the tribunal of the gods, as the temporal punishment which she undergoes is incorporated within the providential scheme which brings her to penitence and moral regeneration. The gods represent not only the

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33. Aswell, 486-87.
34. See Fox, ed., *Testament*, pp.27-30.
35. Ibid., pp.34-7.

natural laws which govern the order of things. Their temporal influence also enacts the moral law as they function as the agents through which the divine will is manifested, a role indicated in Cupid's comment that '3e ar all seuin deificait, / Participant of deuyne sapience' (ll.288-89)[36]. In this respect the tribunal of the gods is an embodiment of providential justice, embodying natural processes whose effects on Cresseid serve not only to reinforce the moral law and punish her transgression of it, but also to initiate a positive spiritual movement which leads her to insight and repentance.

Yet if the depiction of the court of the gods thus invites one to understand their judgement on Cresseid as part of the narrative's upward providential movement, Henryson appears to have done everything possible to prevent one from easily viewing it in a positive light. The description of the gods is organised in such a way as to give an impression of balance and neutrality, alternating between planets who are astrologically malevolent and benevolent. But their judgement is made to seem highly inequitable by the fact that they are pronouncing on an offence against themselves. This impression is strengthened when Mercury selects Saturn and Cynthia to consider Cresseid's case and pronounce judgement on her. As Saturn is a malevolent planet, while the moon takes on the attributes of the planet with which it is in conjunction, Mercury has effectively ensured that any judgement on and punishment of Cresseid will be as harsh as possible. Mercury himself, a supposedly benevolent planet, has doubt cast upon him when he is described as 'Honest and gude, and not ane word culd lie.' (l.252) This last assertion introduces to the poem the very possibility that it denies, and Mercury's depiction as a rhetor, given the dubious reputation of that art with regard to lying, tends to reinforce these doubts.

Moreover, far from being benevolent in their disposition, the emphasis of the gods is entirely on exacting temporal vengeance on Cresseid by bringing her pain. Thus Cupid recommends that 'with pane we suld mak recompence [...], Thairfoir ga help to reuenge, I 3ow pray!' (ll.291-94) The justice of the gods' judgement on Cresseid, whereby her leprosy appears as a natural consequence of her promiscuity and as an external manifestation of her spiritual condition, is also called into

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36. On the gods as enacting the divinely-ordained moral law see ibid., pp.34-5; MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp.69-70; Tillyard, pp.19-22.

question by the fact that her fate is so horrifying as to seem grossly in excess of her original fault. Indeed, as Götz Schmitz has pointed out, Cresseid's upbraiding of the gods is conventional, having precedents in Ovidian and Petrarchan love poetry, as well as in Chaucer's *Troilus*. Yet in none of these precedents does the complaint, or the attitude underlying it, have the strongly negative moral implications or horrifying results that appear in the *Testament*[37]. These aspects of the poem mean that rather than being presented as just, impartial, and ultimately benevolent, the gods' judgement appears as directed by malice, hostility, and destructiveness.

The vindictiveness of the gods invites one to view their actions with dissatisfaction and distress, focusing sympathetic attention on the negative secular movement of the narrative. In foregrounding the aspects of the representation of the gods which evoke this response, indeed making vengefulness and malevolence the most evident characteristics of the planetary tribunal, Henryson accentuates the temporal significance of their judgement so as to interfere with the view that it represents the just and benevolent action of providence. To privilege the poem's providential dimensions, construing sympathy for Cresseid, in the light of the poem's upward spiritual movement, as the product of misplaced priorities thus appears as an inadequate response. It is a view which ignores the positive value attached to such sympathy and concern for Cresseid's secular well-being, which appears in a virtuous light through its opposition to the malevolent disposition of the gods. In this, the poem's spiritual significance necessarily appears as harsh and unfeeling. As H.E. Tolliver argues, while the poem is organised so that both reader and poet are ironically distanced from the narrator's engagement with the action, rendering both him and the sympathy he expresses 'subject to moral judgement', this does not lead to the outright repudiation of his accent on the pathos of Cresseid's decline: 'only by seeing Cresseid through his eyes can we judge her properly.'[38]

As was argued above, the *Testament* ultimately resolves and harmonises these perspectives. But this resolution is reached only through a juxtaposition of the worldly and otherworldly moralities in

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37. See Götz Schmitz, 'Cresseid's Trial: A Revision: Fame and Defamation in Henryson's "Testament of Cresseid"', *Essays and Studies* (1979), 44-56 (pp.52-3).
38. Tolliver, 306.

which neither is finally privileged, and each undermines the other's authority. The poem's disjunctive and contrapuntal organisation thus delineates the limitations and the virtues of both modes of judgement, indicating that each requires the complementary balance of the other, and forcefully underlining the inadequacies which result from their separation. The *Testament* thus aims to take full account of the tension between universal essences and particular things. The distinction of discrete levels of secular and spiritual significance, and the mutual destabilisation which the relation between these levels effects, warns against the temptation to resolve the tension between them by favouring one and repudiating the other, and affirms the need for a comprehensive vision which can embrace both.

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The literary strategies outlined above have a number of significant implications with regard to the relation between Henryson's work and Scholastic literary theory. The importance of the Scholastic background in this context is evident from the character of the disjunctive perspectives which Henryson distinguishes in the *Testament*. The poem's metaphysical dimension, where judgement operates by situating Cresseid's initial error and subsequent fate within the frame of the *a priori* opposition of *voluptas* and *caritas*, confers an ideal certitude on the meaning it attaches to human actions. But in its indifference to and neglect of the pathos of Cresseid's tragedy, it appears incapable of taking adequate account of the immediate implications which such actions may have within their sensible context. Conversely, the poem's secular level is clearly sensitive to the sensible resonances of the poem's action. But in assigning meaning on the basis of these resonances, it risks losing sight of any absolute basis for judgement. Even the value which is conferred on the courtly virtue of mutual fidelity in love as a defence against the entropic forces which govern secular life and which threaten human happiness is shown to be inadequate as an affirmative vision. The *Testament*'s disjunctive structure can thus be seen to address the tension between the affective and idealising axes of Scholastic literary theory, exposing the dangers of privileging either one of the at the expense of the other. In this it urges the need for an inclusive perspective which

embraces both elements, so that meaning defined with reference to an absolute moral law can legitimise and be combined with a mode of understanding which appeals to problems and aspirations associated with an action's secular implications. This once again underscores the extent to which Henryson's literary strategy in the *Testament* is shaped according to criteria inherited from Scholastic literary theory.

Moreover, Henryson's response to the problems which he inherits from Scholasticism modifies the protocols of Scholastic exegesis, drawing on them in ways which once again demonstrate the creative character of his engagement with tradition. The parallel between the allegorists' distinguishing multiple levels of significance in a text, all of which harmonise within a comprehensive frame of meaning, and the *Testament*'s balancing of discrete levels of significance has already been noted, as has the fact that Henryson's deployment of the multi-layered text departs from established practice in that Henryson uses it to comprehend and direct attention towards an action's concrete significance, to which he affords a priority not previously evident. This modification is of a piece with Henryson's insistence on the need not only to relate particular actions and events to absolute moral norms, but also to apprehend such abstract norms in terms of their concrete worldly implications.

But Henryson's creative deployment of the allegorical tradition goes further than this. The dramatic juxtapositioning of the different levels of significance in the *Testament* produces a disjunctive patterning very different from what is traditionally found in allegoresis. The different levels of significance which Scholastic exegetes distinguish in a text exist in a relationship which, while involving a degree of mutual destabilisation, does not ultimately call the certitude of any of them into question. The diversity of equally valid readings which are available certainly prevents any one of them from receiving final privilege as the correct one and insists that the accentuation of one at the expense of the others is justified on merely provisional heuristic grounds. But this mutual destabilisation only highlights the inadequacy of a given reading in relation to the comprehensive *intentio* which underlies a text. It is countered by an awareness of the validity which an adduced *sententia*

derives from its positive connection to that *intentio*, and which permits it to be assigned an absolute *auctoritas* when considered in itself[39].

Henryson's procedure is very different. In the *Testament*, the mutual destabilisation produced through the interference of the text's discrete levels of significance is much more radical. The different perspectives impinge forcefully on one another's ground, each calling into question not only the hermeneutic priority of the other, but also its adequacy as a mode of judging human actions. Taking the traditional conception of meaning as being both distanced from and connected to the Word, Henryson stresses the distance, refusing to permit the interference between different levels of significance to be easily contained within an affirmation of their shared authority. He ensures that the limitations which associate a given perspective with the uncertainty and partiality of human interpretation, rather than with the absolute authority of divine truth, are fully grasped.

The implications of this aspect of the *Testament* with regard to Henryson's attitudes towards literary signification can be illuminated by Paul de Man's theory of allegory. De Man's view of allegory extends the term's reference beyond what is normally understood by it: indeed he sees it less as a literary mode than as an essential component of all linguistic signification, which, for de Man, always suspends the possibility of arriving at a stable interpretation[40]. De Man's understanding of allegory is apposite to the specific literary mode of the *Testament*, and allows for a clear description of its similarities and dissimilarities to conventional Scholastic views of literary signification.

De Man describes allegory as a 'structural interference' between two sign systems operating in the same text, one governed by a prior system of values, the other by narrative syntax, with this interference leading to what he terms 'unreadability'[41]. I take 'unreadability' to mean that the text simultaneously posits meaning and undermines it, refusing to allow interpretation any stable resting-point. This pattern neatly summarises the structure of the *Testament*, with its delineation of an absolute level of significance wherein Cresseid's actions are understood

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39. See above, Ch.2, pp.74-8.
40. See, for instance, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp.16-19.
41. See *Allegories of Reading*, p.206.

with reference to an *a priori* system of values (*caritas/voluptas*, reason/sensuality), and a contingent level which defines the significance of those actions in relation to their tragic temporal consequences as delineated on the level of plot. The 'structural interference' between these modes of judgement indeed leads to a certain 'unreadability', as the text destabilises any attempt to privilege one over the other, showing that to do so is to impose a narrow closure on a text whose significative structure exceeds the limits of either perspective.

Henryson's destabilisation of reading is, of course, less radical than that which appears in De Man's work: Henryson ultimately affirms that these partial readings are perspectives on an overall significance which harmoniously comprehends both of them. But there is a connection in De Man's thought between his view of allegory and his understanding of literary discourse, which reflects significantly on the relation between the structure of the *Testament* and the medieval sense of the dangers of poetic language. Just as De Man sees the allegorical dimension of texts as leading to the destabilisation of the meanings which they affirm, so too he considers the specifically literary qualities of texts to consist in their self-cancelling and de-mystifying nature: the fact that in foregrounding their rhetoricity, they undermine their referential function and their truth-claims, presenting their meaning as a textual construct:

> The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterises the work of literature in its essence.[42]

This definition of literature, or literariness, recalls the early-medieval concern over how literary discourse subverts claims to authority and truth by undermining a referential view of language. A large part of the project of Scholastic literary theory was to contain those aspects of the literary text which draw attention to its constitutive role in the production of meaning, reducing their function in the significative process by assigning them an instrumental affective role in the communication of prior truths.

As the parallel between de Man's definitions of allegory and literature make clear, the disjunctive relation between the *Testament*'s different levels of significance draws attention to those aspects of literary

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42. Paul de Man, 'Criticism and Crisis', in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp.3-19 (p.17).

discourse which Scholastic literary theory aims to contain. In foregrounding the limitations of the poem's concretising and idealising perspectives, Henryson draws attention to the fact that the meanings arrived at on these different levels are produced through human interpretative activity. He thus stresses the fact that a text's significance is constituted within the constraints of particular priorities and concerns, obstructing any attempt to identify meaning with prior truths.

Unlike his Scholastic predecessors, then, Henryson develops a model of signification in the *Testament* in which the uncertainties and limitations of meaning are fully recognised. In this, Henryson's modification of the allegorical tradition is related in its effects to his treatment of authorship and authority. As was argued in the previous chapter, the narrator's comments on the poem's authorship and provenance, while certainly asserting its value, also refuse any final privilege to the narrative which is presented, attesting to its provisionality as the fictional creation of an individual author. The disjunctive and contrapuntal organisation which characterises the narrative of Cresseid's fate thus co-operates with the discussion of authorship and textual authority which frames that narrative, both highlighting the ways in which meaning is produced rather than given. The latter, in questioning the *Testament*'s historical veracity, invites one to consider the narrative as itself constituted through the exercise of authorial creativity. The former, in having different levels of significance call each other into question, indicates that the moral *sententiae* which attach to that narrative are produced only in accordance with specific models of signification, the limited interpretative priorities of which are clearly delineated. In both instances the signified meaning's transcendence of the linguistic realm is called into question, as its association with an interpretative activity inherent in the process of signification is underscored.

The narrator's pity for Cresseid's loss of reputation also works in concert with these aspects of the *Testament*, as becomes clear in the stanza which deals with her detractors. Having cast doubt on the historical veracity of the narrative, with that doubt being reinforced by the hearsay status assigned to the assertion that Cresseid, on being abandoned by Diomeid, 'walkit vp and doun, / And *sum men sayis*, into the court commoun' (ll.76-77, my italics), the narrator proceeds to take

the narrative's suggestion of her promiscuity seriously, treating it *as though* it were a reliable account:

> O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se
> Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait
> To change in filth all thy femininitie,
> And be with fleschelie lust sa maculait [...]!
> I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!
> (ll.78-84))

The questioning tone of this passage may suggest a continuing incredulity towards the tale of Cresseid's behaviour, but the final line, with its expression of pity, clearly has the narrator engaging with the provisional account on its own terms. Yet even given his engagement, the narrator rejects any totalising vision of Cresseid:

> 3it nevertheless, quhat euer men deme or say
> In scornefull langage of thy brukkilnes,
> I sall excuse als far furth as I may
> Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes,
> The quhilk fortoun hes put to sic distres
> As hir plesit, and nathing throw the gilt
> Of the - throw wickit langage to be spilt!
> (ll.85-91)

As noted above, while the qualification 'als far furth as I may' suggests an awareness that some degree of moral condemnation is warranted, this is accompanied by a refusal to see Cresseid's sins as consuming her whole being (p.186). The statement that Cresseid's loss of reputation was 'nathing throw the gilt / Of the' suggests that regardless of whatever real guilt might attach to her, the sweeping denigration of her character which has ensued is unwarranted. In this, the narrator's pity at Cresseid's loss of reputation conjoins with the pity and horror at her actual fate which is stressed throughout the poem, and which constantly demands that we view Cresseid not merely in terms of what she now is, but that we also consider what she once was: 'sweit, gentill and amorous' (l.326). The narrator's insistence that, despite Cresseid's 'brukkilnes', her more noble features should not be forgotten, implies that the generalising condemnations to which he openly objects give a reductive view of a complex and multi-faceted existence, in the light of which negative judgements on her can only have a relative validity.

The narrator's pity is, then, connected to a recognition of the exclusions through which the judgemental representation of Cresseid is constructed. The word 'langage' appears twice in this stanza, thus

associating the adverse account of Cresseid with the linguistic realm. Combined with the narrator's reiteration of those qualities in Cresseid which such merely negative representations of her exclude (her 'womanheid', 'wisdome and fairnes'), this association foregrounds the gap between sign and referent. The error of Cresseid's detractors is that they provide a picture of her which is a textual construct, constituted by those exclusions which the narrator seeks to counter, and then identify their reading of her with Cresseid herself, disregarding its limitations. Such closure is strongly resisted by the narrator, and it is this which allows his reaction to be tempered with pity rather than taking the shape of a blanket condemnation. For him, the complexity of Cresseid's existence cannot be encompassed by any simple moral categorisation.

The way in which the *Testament* layers these various qualifications demonstrates the extent to which their common emphasis on the interpretative textual character of meaning is an essential feature of the poem. The discussion of the text's authorship and provenance which frames the narrative undermines its claims to historical veracity and stresses the authorial activity which produces it. Following this, the attack on Cresseid's detractors indicates that even when seriously engaging with the poem's account of Cresseid, the partial and reductive nature of its account of Cresseid's fate must be borne in mind, as it selects and foregrounds certain aspects of her being while excluding others: any *sententia* based on such a partial account provides not a summation of her moral condition, but merely a perspective on it. The disjunctive organisation of the different levels of significance attached to the narrative qualifies yet further the relative validity afforded to such partial evaluations. The mutual destabilisation effected by the interference between the secular and idealising interpretations on Cresseid's fate indicates that each is to be seen as limited not only in relation to the totality of Cresseid's existence, but also in relation to this portion of it. Each level of meaning proffers an evaluation which is shown to have been produced in accordance with a limited interpretative perspective, prioritising a model of signification which falls short of encompassing the totality of the narrative's resonances. The inability of either of these perspectives to provide a competent and satisfactory mode of judging human actions is thus underscored.

The conclusion of the poem, in which the narrator remains pointedly silent on Cresseid's fate after her death, further reinforces this accent on the textual limitations of the *Testament*. Critics have varied in their opinion on the significance of Henryson's silence here, some assuming that Cresseid's salvation is obvious, and others taking it to confirm that the poem holds out no redemptive hope[43]. The issue cannot be settled by pointing to the pagan setting of the poem as evidence of Cresseid's exclusion from Christian salvation. In an article on *Piers Plowman*, T.P. Dunning has demonstrated that in the later Middle Ages a variety of paths to salvation were open to heathens, so that Cresseid's fate is not determinable on the basis of her paganism[44]. The narrator's pointed refusal to speak of Cresseid's fate after death is in fact comparable to Chaucer's prevarications as to the spiritual fate of his pagan characters[45]. Henryson's refusal to pronounce on the question of Cresseid's salvation leaves matters in doubt, and is a tacit recognition that such a determination can lie only with God, before whose comprehensive vision all human interpretations must humbly recognise their own inadequacies. The *Testament*'s silence as to this question once more underscores the deficiencies of its representations, and their incapacity to provide any final and decisive evaluation of Cresseid's existence.

In stressing the constitutive and interpretative nature of signification in the *Testament*, Henryson underlines the gap between sign and referent. Language is shown not merely to mediate between a receiver and a prior subsistent meaning. Rather, meaning is seen to be actively formulated through processes of invention, differentiation, and categorisation, which distance it from any substantial origin, and firmly place it under the aegis of textuality. The *Testament* thus systematically invokes the very forces whose disruption of certitude and authority Scholastic literary theory sought to contain.

Yet, for all its destabilising self-reflexive features, the *Testament*'s emphasis is not merely negative. The narrator's opening observations on authorship and authority, while casting doubt on the reliability of the

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43. For two such conflicting assessments, see Fox (ed.), *Testament*, p.57, and Spearing, *Criticism*, p.189.

44. T.P. Dunning, 'Langland and the Salvation of the Heathen', *Medium Aevum*, 12 (1943), 45-54. See also Ymaginatif's comments in *Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 1978), XII, 278-295.

45. See for instance, *The Knight's Tale*, *CT*, I, 2809-16.

narrative, do not prevent him immediately proceeding to recount it and to engage with it on its own terms. The narrative is seen as worthy of consideration, regardless of its limitations. Similarly, the inadequacies of the secular and spiritual levels of significance which are distinguished in the poem are defined in relation to a holistic perspective which encompasses both of them, and affords them a relative validity as partial perspectives thereon. This relative degree of affirmative value is also indicated in the narrator's closing remarks which maintain the distinction of these discrete levels of significance even while affirming their consonance within a unifying comprehensive vision. The implication is that while one must always recall that either perspective remains inadequate in itself, their distinction can be justified by its rhetorical and ethical utility: it permits one to arrive at the same moral values by different paths, thus facilitating the text's capacity to convey its meaning in a manner adapted to the understanding and sensibilities of different audiences. These aspects of the *Testament* indicate that, while it is a poem wherein one is encouraged to be aware of the inadequacies of the judgements which the text posits, its accent on the provisional and interpretative character of meaning is not to be taken as entirely eliminating the possibility of construing valid and useful moral *sententiae*.

Henryson's stress on the textual character of the *Testament* and the concomitant limitations of the poem's meaning is in fact designed to contain and overcome the judgemental uncertainty produced by the disproportionate relation between transcendent norms and the significances acquired by human actions in their actual resonances. The *Testament* ultimately affirms a positive relationship between the two which can provide a clear and viable basis for moral understanding. The poem delineates the inadequacy of the moral judgements which it presents so as to clear the ground in order to define more precisely the terms in which those judgements can be deemed valid.

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To understand how Henryson's destabilising literary strategies in the *Testament* serve to affirm a positive mode of moral vision, it is necessary to examine their implications with regard to the tension between the

affective and idealising imperatives of Scholastic literary theory. While the former of these imperatives urges that moral values be addressed as closely as possible to worldly circumstances, the latter insists that they be assigned a universality which transcends any temporal contexts. In the light of the debate and epistemological uncertainty engendered by the late-medieval awareness that particular reality cannot be assimilated within universal categories without an extreme reductivness, it becomes difficult to find a mode of judgement which satisfies both of the Scholastic prerequisites[46]. The tension between them inhibits the process of moral judgement and reform, as the satisfactory application to human actions of a coherent and normative set of moral values is hindered by an awareness that such values, in failing to address the qualities which actions accrue in their temporal contexts, provide an understanding of existence which neglects significant dimensions of its reality. The process of establishing clear guidelines for ethical judgement and action is thus problematised.

It is clear that these are issues which Henryson cannot afford to dismiss. To fail to engage with them would be to neglect a major and problematic tendency in late-medieval thought which threatens to compromise the moral efficacy of his own work and challenges its capacity to address moral judgements to the lives of its audience. It has already been noted in this chapter that the disjunctive interaction of the *Testament*'s secular and metaphysical levels of significance registers the lack of congruence between universal essences and particular realities in late-medieval thought: simple moralisations are shown to provide an image of reality which appears insensitive to the qualities which human actions take on in their temporal dimension, while judgements founded on the latter seem unsatisfactory in their contingency and lack of any positive authority. In foregrounding the limits of these different perspectives in a manner whereby each provides what the other lacks, Henryson urges the need for the comprehensive vision which is provided towards the poem's close, within which the relationship of these perspectives becomes complementary rather than antagonistic. At the same time, the disjunctive organisation of the poem's different levels of significance serves a valid function in exposing the problems presented by any privileging of one perspective over the other. The late-medieval

46. See above, Ch.2, pp.84-93.

sense of the tension between universal values and particular realities makes such privileging an immanent danger. By thus guarding against it, Henryson aims to ensure that literature's capacity to mediate effectively between ideal moral norms and individual human actions can be sustained in the post-Nominalist context in which he writes.

The *Testament*'s mode of signification is thus both critique and continuation of the priorities of Scholastic literary theory. In developing a mode of judgement which is orientated toward the actual as much as the ideal, and which critiques a merely transcendently-orientated mode of judgement, Henryson suggests that, in view of the gulf between universals and particulars, the abstractive Scholastic model of literary signification model is no longer tenable. But the terms in which this critique is couched indicate a continuing commitment to such theory. The concretising emphasis of the *Testament*, which demands that the moral values which it recommends be understood in terms of their worldly implications as well as of their universal resonances, is entirely in keeping with the affective emphasis of Scholastic literary theory. Henryson criticises the model of signification traditionally presumed in Scholastic exegesis in terms which are themselves derived from Scholasticism. His aim is not to displace the Scholastic conception of literature. Rather, the *Testament* evolves a significative mode designed to maintain literature's conformity to the imperatives laid down by Scholastic literary theory, and which does so in being adapted to a post-Nominalist context in which the established Scholastic definitions and interpretative protocols are no longer adequate to achieve this end.

Henryson's invocation of the destabilising forces of textuality is in this respect a strategy of containment. The inadequacy of the *Testament*'s different judgemental modes is foregrounded in order to reinforce the poem's recommendation of a perspective which transcends their limits, and which in attending to practical secular value as well as to inherent worthiness, enables a viable and authoritative moral understanding of human actions. Henryson's foregrounding of the *Testament*'s textuality thus preserves the Scholastic concern over maintaining a sense of the ideal truth-value of literary meaning, while ensuring that such meaning can be adequately related to actual circumstances in accordance with the affective requirement of Scholastic theory.

Other aspects of the *Testament*'s textualising stress on the interpretative character of the moral judgements which it presents similarly serve to maintain a sense of the positive relation between simple moral values and concrete situations. The narrator's 'pietie', and his refusal of any generalising condemnation of Cresseid, stress that the signs of the text produce only a partial image of a complex and multi-faceted being, and that any moral evaluation based on the narrative presented is necessarily a reductive account of Cresseid's existence. Hence, while depicting Cresseid as an exemplum of concupiscence, defined in terms both of its secular and metaphysical implications, the *Testament* also signals that this representation is necessarily built upon exclusions. Henryson thus indicates that particular existents cannot in their entirety be assimilated within any simple categorisation. The poem invites one to reach a moral judgement, but also undermines the validity of that judgement in relation to the complexities of particular reality.

Once again, this aspect of the *Testament* is relevant to the late-medieval perception that particular existents cannot be adequately defined in terms of simple values. And as before, this perception results in a sense that sentential moralisations have small bearing on actual life. The equivocal and complex nature of existents resists summatory categorisation. The resultant impeding of judgement, however, differs slightly from that which obtains from the lack of congruence between the ideal and actual dimensions of reality. While Henryson is able, in the *Testament* at least, to bypass the latter impediment by harmonising both dimensions of the poem's action within a comprehensive appraisal of its significance, the disruptive effects of the former problem are much less readily reducible. Henryson's foregrounding of the multi-faceted nature of Cresseid's being casts doubt not merely on the relation between ideal values and actual existence, but on the validity of any sentential evaluation of reality.

The inadequacy of the depiction of Cresseid as an admonitory exemplum of *cupiditas*, however, pertains only when one considers that the *Testament* provides merely a partial representation of the *totality* of her existence. The poem's warning against concupiscence, seems entirely valid within the limited frame of the narrative, and clearly apposite to the events depicted therein. Nothing in the *Testament* disputes the affirmation that this exemplative treatment of Cresseid, in negatively

interpreting her promiscuity and sensual outlook as error and folly in both spiritual and worldly terms, provides a wholly pertinent and adequate reading of the specific actions depicted in the poem. Henryson thus emphasises that the knowledge provided by simple categorisations is partial and imperfect in its exclusion of significant aspects of Cresseid's existence when considered in its totality, while at the same time affirming the applicability and authority of such knowledge with regard to the specific portion of her life on which judgement is being brought to bear.

The *Testament* thus presents a mode of judgement which again affirms the connection between simple values and human life. At the same time, by assigning the significance established on these terms only a relative perspectival validity, Henryson maintains an awareness of those aspects of the multiform nature of an individual life which exceed the compass of such exemplative judgement. The poem's restriction of the evaluative scope of its summatory categorisations is thus directed towards clarifying moral vision. Henryson highlights the oblique relation between simple values and actual reality in order to define more clearly the area of positive relation between them. The images of reality provided by sentential and universalising determinations of significance retain an evaluative legitimacy, even as their inadequacies are recognised. The actual pertinence and applicability of simple values, while restricted in its compass, is more powerfully affirmed for being precisely defined.

The final way in which Henrsyon's qualifications of the *Testament*'s narrative tend to affirm the validity of its meaning lies in their reinforcing of the poem's affective power. The poem's questioning of its own historical veracity, its drawing attention to the fictionality of its account of Cresseid's life, combines with other aspects of the poem to stress the distance between Cresseid herself and the textual image of her presented here. Henryson thus signals that the primary value of the *Testament* does not lie in what it can tell us about Cresseid. The accent on the creative interpretative aspects of the poem invites one to consider the *Testament* as an authorial construct, shaped according to motivations which direct its significance outwards towards the audience, or audiences, for whose instruction it has been constructed: 'Maid for *3*our worschip and instructioun' (l.611).

In this, the stress on the *Testament*'s status as a provisional fiction is designed to underscore Cresseid's injunction, 'in *3*our mynd ane mirrour mak of me' (l.457). Herbert Grabes has pointed out that mirror imagery in medieval texts, especially those which present images of mutability as is the case with the *Testament*, indicated that the fates of literary characters were to be regarded as 'unmasking mirrors in which everyone may catch a glimpse of his ineluctable fate. They move the beholder to incorporate this knowledge into his everyday affairs and his moral attitudes.'[47] Henryson's stress on the interpretative and creative aspects of the *Testament* invite precisely this conception of the text, encouraging the poem's readers to understand its *sententia* as directed towards their own moral life.

The features of the *Testament* outlined above re-emphasise the extent of Henryson's debt to Scholastic literary theory, along with the analytical rigour and independence of mind which characterise his engagement with it. This debt is evident in the audience-orientated nature of the poem, which continues the affective emphasis of Scholastic literary theory. It is equally apparent in Henryson's concern to maintain literature's capacity to mediate between ideal values and actual life, defining its function in terms which preserve both its transcendent reference and ethical utility, and thus satisfy the two key imperatives of Scholastic literary thought. Similarly, the perspectival structure by which Henryson achieves this clearly owes much to the model of signification presumed in the tradition of allegorical exegesis.

At the same time, Henryson's engagement with Scholastic theory is critical and modificatory. In his sensitivity to the material significance of human actions, and his awareness of the inadequacy of a mode of judgement which neglects this level of their significance, Henryson departs from the traditional universalising emphasis of academic Scholasticism. But this critique and dissent from Scholastic norms is itself motivated by a commitment to the Scholastic requirement that literary meaning be directed towards a practical ethical end, and constitutes an attempt to fulfil that requirement in terms adapted to his own post-Nominalist epoch. Henryson also abandons the medieval and

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47. Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance*, trans. G. Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.93.

Scholastic tendency to define literary meaning as being wholly independent of the confabulatory processes through which the text is constructed. For Henryson, a text does not passively convey its significance to the mind of an audience. The *Testament*'s perspectival organisation permits him to present meaning as having been contructed through an interpretative and discriminatory processing of reality, while at the same time retaining a sense of validating reference to a strictly delimited aspect of the substantial nature of that reality. Henryson draws on exegetical protocols furnished by Scholastic theory in order to reconcile the idealising and affective emphases of that theory by establishing a positive relation between simple norms and actual reality. But the mode of signification which he develops in order to achieve this entails a recognition of the figmentary character of even universalised *sententiae* which departs radically from the emphasis found in the Scholastic traditions which provide the motivation and the means for the *Testament*'s singular construction.

Here, as throughout the *Testament*, Henryson utilises the resources of Scholastic literary theory with considerable flexibility and freedom. At the same time, the innovatory literary strategies which he develops are aimed at preserving the Scholastic conception of literary signification in a context where that conception has become highly problematic, with the traditional biases of Scholasticism being no longer adequate to establish a relation between the literary text, universal values, and human life. The *Testament* thus demonstrates both Henryson's commitment to the Scholastic theoretical tradition, and the critical and productive character of his engagement with it.

Whatever the internal coherence of the Testament, however, doubts remain over how satisfactory its proposed reconciliation of idealising and concretising modes of judgement really is. Comparison with 'The Two Mice' shows that the *Testament* fails to address a significant aspect of this tension. The *Testament* presents a situation where the temporal implications and universal overtones of Cresseid's actions agree in inviting one to view her behaviour in negative terms, as either spiritual corruption or secular folly. In 'The Two Mice', however, these modes of judgement do not invite compatible conclusions. There, Henryson presents a situation where actions which are to be condemned according to an *a priori* set of moral values appear quite justifiable when

considered in their secular context[48]. As in the *Testament*, each mode of judgement acquires an irreducibly textual character: the evaluations of both are seen to be constituted through a process of differentiation and exclusion, whereby certain of an action's apparently significant dimensions are prioritised and others excluded. But in 'The Two Mice', the incompatibiity of these perspectives leaves judgement suspended, proffering neither a reconciliation of the differing modes of judgemental, nor any means of deciding which should receive priority.

'The Two Mice', then, agrees with the *Testament* in acknowledging the necessarily figmentary character which the disproportionate relation between universals and particulars imposes on moral judgement. Humanity's apprehension of reality is necessarily mediated through signs which depart from the reality they purport to describe. But the fable provides a much darker understanding of this situation. In the *Testament*, the influence of such fictive representations on the human faculties is positively figured in Troilus' recollection of Cresseid's image:

> The idole of ane thing in cace may be
> Sa deip imprentit in the fantasy
> That it deludis the wittis outwardly,
> And sa appeiris in forme and lyke estait
> Within the mynd as it was figurait.
> (ll.507-11)

Even as Troilus fails to recognise the real Cresseid in her debased condition, his senses are further beguiled by a purely mental impression which nevertheless determines his reaction to her. His act of charity towards Cresseid is motivated by 'knichtlie pietie and memoriall / Of fair Cresseid' (ll.519-20), sentiments which have been aroused by the conjuring of her image. Troilus' perception is clearly deluded here by a fictive ideal[49]. But his delusion is ultimately a beneficial one, resulting in Cresseid's own self-knowledge[50]. This is quite in accordance with the *Testament*'s perspectival structure which indicates that true moral insight can only be effected by representations whose departure from reality assigns them a necessarily figmentary, textual quality.

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48. See above, Ch.3, pp.127-42.

49. Benson argues that Troilus is here being criticised for his delusion, pp.265-66.

50. See Anne M. McKim, 'Henryson's "Memoriall of Fair Cresseid"', in *Of Lion and of Unicorn: Essays on Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations in Honour of Professor John MacQueen*, ed. R.D.S. Jack and K. McGinley (Edinburgh: Quadriga, 1993), pp.1-15 (p.10).

But in 'The Two Mice', the separation of signs from things thoroughly debilitates the human understanding. The disjunction between universals and particulars results in actions taking on a diverse range of possible significances, each of which displaces the other, with no means of deciding which, if any, provides a true understanding. As Henryson puts it in 'The Preaching of the Swallow', 'Sa is our saull with fantasie opprest, / To knaw the thingis in nature manifest.' (ll.1641-42). Set against this congenital uncertainty in the *Fables* is the impending threat of divine judgement and damnation. Henryson thus presents a situation in which the moral faculties of humanity are condemned to an unavoidable uncertainty and vacillation, while no margin is provided for the errors which must inevitably result from this. While Henryson's treatment of the relation between the ideal and the actual is more honest and thorough in the *Fables* than in the *Testament*, his vision is also much bleaker and more pessimistic therein. The *Fables* provides no resolution of the crisis of representation which has resulted from the tensions and contradictions of Scholastic literary theory. But, as will be argued in the next chapter, the collection does offer a rigorous analysis of the nature of that crisis and of its implications for the possibility of establishing moral and social order on earth.

Chapter Six

With Fantasie Opprest: Visions of Disorder in the *Fables*

> Et grammatice (quam in Latinum transferentes litteraturum vocaverunt) fines suos norit, praesertim tantum ab hac appelationis suae paupertate, intra quam primi illi constitere, provecta.
>
> (Quintilian, *Institutio*, II, i, 4)[1]

1

In the *Fables*, Henryson gives considerable attention to problems of social as well as individual morality. Fables such as 'The Sheep and the Dog', 'The Lion and the Mouse', 'The Wolf and the Wether', and 'The Wolf and the Lamb' place a powerful emphasis on the connection between moral and social disorder, focusing on both the oppression of the poor and on the danger of rebellion against the social hierarchy. Concern is also expressed over the abuse of the legal system which leads to a failure in the proper administration of justice. These aspects of the *Fables* are not separate from the problems of representation which Henryson addresses therein. Henryson's questioning of the nature and function of literary representation poses semiotic problems which are a root cause of the social corruption and disorder to which he objects. The fables display a fractured mode of signification which both emblematises a more general disorder in the world and embodies the disruption of moral vision from which it results.

Many of the representations of language and signs in the *Fables* highlight their disruptive potential. The deceptive power of language is foregrounded repeatedly, with the attachment of false names to things appearing as a pervasive strategy for misleading oneself and others. In 'The Trial of the Fox', the special dispensation which the mare claims excuses her from the lion's summons turns out to be a blow from her hoof (ll.1008-24). In 'The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger', the dubious

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1. Cited in Murphy, p.24n.

significance of the 'nekherring' with which the Cadger threatens Lowrence is exploited fully by the fox, to the wolf's detriment:

> 'It is ane syde of salmond, as it wair,
> And callour, pypand lyke ane pertrik ee:
> It is worth all the hering *3*e haue thair -
> *3*e, and we had it swa, is it worth sic thre.'
> (ll.2126-29)

In 'The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandsman', the farmer's metaphorically intended imprecation against his oxen, '"The volff [...] mot haue *3*ou all at anis!"' (l.2244), is held against him in a literal, legalistic interpretation by the Wolf, who exploits the potential for confusion generated by the co-existence in one sentence of discrete levels of grammatical and rhetorical significance. In the same fable, Lowrence's beguiling of the wolf with a fictional cheese which he identifies with the moon's reflection in a well (ll.2392-98), extends the *moralitas*' execration of covetousness as 'all bot fraud and fantasie' (l.2451) to encompass the duplicitous significations which result from language's intervention between things and our perception of them.

Like the *Testament of Cresseid*, then, the *Fables* displays an awareness of how the distance between sign and referent compromises knowledge, instituting a breach between the significances we attach to reality and the things of which they are predicated. In the *Testament*, the separation of signs from things is accounted for within a perspectival structure which maintains an oblique reference whereby meaning retains a relative validity. In the *Fables*, however, no such resolution of the problem is forthcoming. As 'The Two Mice' illustrates, the ideal and actual dimensions of moral actions exist in a much more violently disjunctive and exclusive relation than in the *Testament*, refusing to be reconciled within any comprehensive structure. The way in which the disproportion between the universal and the particular exacerbates the uncertainties to which moral representation and judgement are subject is neatly summated in 'The Cock and the Fox'.

In this fable, the hens present a series of vying representations of Chantecleir and his fate (ll.495-543). Chantecleir is depicted as a dutiful model of courtly virtue comparable to Troilus in the *Testament* (ll.495-508), as impotent, jealous, and abusive (ll.516-19), and as sinful in his pride, faithlessness and lechery (ll.530-43). His fate is either a tragic

loss, a good riddance, or divine retribution. Gregory Kratzmann describes the effects of this passage of the fable admirably:

> The four mock-epitaphs spoken by the three wives (Pertok provides a startling corrective to her initial lament in response to Sprutok's persuasion) construct Chantecleir's nature in opposing ways; each block of dramatic rhetoric offers a point of view which answers to the speaker's own sense of self, and the truth of Chauntecleir's 'gentillesse' is finally indeterminate. As each invents her own reality, the poetry highlights the power of language both to persuade and to delude.[2]

Reality itself slips away, as the understanding grasps it indirectly through signs whose divergence from things, and capacity to be evoked in the absence of their proper referent, undermines any certainty as to the truth of their constructions.

The gap between sign and referent and the resultant obscuring of the nature of things is connected in this same passage with the disproportionate relation of the ideal and the actual. Coppok's moralising pronouncements introduce to the fable an awareness of the imminence of divine judgement on evildoers:

> 'Bot rychteous God, haldand the balandis euin,
> Smytis rycht sair, thocht he be patient,
> Adulterairis that list thame not repent.'
> (ll.535-37)

In the light of this, the need to be able to understand how one's actions appear in the eyes of God becomes of paramount importance. Coppok's outlook here is a compelling one. In evoking, however prematurely in this instance, the inevitable judgement which awaits all those who have 'comptit not for Goddis fauour or feid' (l.539), it combines with the gradually darkening tone of the fables[3], and with the stress in many of the *moralitates* on the everlasting horror of damnation[4], to affirm the

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2. Gregory Kratzmann, 'The Poetics of the "Fenyeit Fabill": Chaucer and the Middle Scots Poets', in *Of Lion and of Unicorn*, pp.16-38 (pp.27-8).

3. I take the order of the *Fables* as presented in Fox's edition to be authoritative. The symmetries and patterns revealed in the analysis by George D. Gopen in his 'The Essential Seriousness of Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*: A Study in Structure', *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985), 42-53, are too precise and pervasise to be accidental. See also H.H. Roerecke, *The Integrity and Symmetry of Robert Henryson's* Moral Fables (PhD thesis: Pennsylvania State University, 1969). On the darkening tone of the *Fables*, see Fox's observations in his introduction to *Poems*, pp.lxxix-lxxxi.

4. See, for instance, 'The Cock and the Fox', 595-99; 'The Preaching of the Swallow', 1930-36; 'The Fox, the Wolf and the Husbandsman', 2450-54; 'The Wolf and the Lamb', 2720, 2765-69.

urgency of moral reform and the dire consequences of failing to consider the absolute resonances of human actions.

But whatever the persuasiveness of Coppok's moralising considered *per se*, it is not clear that it is appropriate in these circumstances. While the fable can undoubtedly serve as a warning of the practical dangers of a vain susceptibility to flattery, its events have little obvious bearing on the question of Chantecleir's alleged adultery. Moreover, Chantecleir's eventual escape from the fox casts doubt on Coppok's reading of the fable's action as not merely revealing Chantecleir's foolishness, but as an expression of divine displeasure, and a vindication of God's justice. The weight of reprobatory significance that she ascribes to an incident which, whatever its disastrous potential, finally comes to nothing, suggests that her will to moralise may be excessive. This suspicion is heightened by the narratorial prelude to her observations: 'Than Coppok lyke ane curate spak full crous' (l.530). As in 'The Cock and the Jasp', the word 'crous' is ambivalent. It might be taken here to mean 'bold', implying a readiness to speak out against sin. Equally, it might be taken to mean 'boastful', in which case it would suggest that Coppok's willingness to cast Chantecleir's misfortune in the most condemnatory light possible derives from a complacent conceit and sense of moral superiority, which lead her to ascribe her own prejudices to the divinity.

The disparity between the apparent significance of the events described in the fable and that which Coppok ascribes to them is neatly emblematised in the summatory couplet which concludes her discourse:

> 'Thairfoir it is the verray hand off God
> That causit him be werryit with the tod.'
> (ll.542-3)

The rhyming juxtaposition of the words 'God' and 'tod' underscores the bathetic effect of the couplet, which points up the absurdity of thus seeing the divine will revealed in a commonplace farmyard incident, and the incongruity of finding momentous eschatological significance in things which are apparently mundane and unspectacular. Coppok's sermonising certainly stresses the urgency of arriving at a true understanding of the essential moral nature of human actions given the prospect of divine judgement, and fosters a sobering awareness of the fact that, as the *moralitas* to 'The Wolf and the Lamb' affirms, 'God in his diuinite / The

wrang, the richt, of all thy werkis wait.' (ll.2722-23) But the uncertain applicability of her remarks to Chantecleir's circumstances suggests that the obliquity with which absolute values apply to the complexities of particular realities must raise doubts over whether the significance established by such categorising is anything more than an arbitrary imposition. Coppok's moral perspective thus joins with the passage as a whole to indicate the problems involved in trying to arrive at a sure understanding of the real nature of things. The difficulty of distinguishing fiction from truth which results from the lack of necessary relation between sign and referent is exacerbated by the disproportionate relation of the universal and the particular, which introduces a diversity of possible and incompatible significances to things. The evidently differential and exclusory nature of such disjunct meanings leaves the understanding unable to extricate itself from the duplicitous realm of signs.

Henryson has no doubt that ultimately humanity will be subject to absolute judgement. This is implicit in the emphasis on the horrors of eternal damnation which frequently occurs in the *moralitates*, a prospect before which there is little room for moral relativism. But the obliquity with which simple moral categories come to bear on temporal reality, their narrow strictures being exceeded or challenged by the possible significances introduced by that reality's complex contingent resonances, means that the understanding is deprived of any clear criteria of judgement and can never be free from vacillation and the risk of error. The crisis of representation which the *Fables* presents is one in which the Scholastic conception of literature breaks down. Poetry no longer appears as an affectively useful adjunct to moral understanding and action, facilitating an audience's reception of ideal truths in a manner which establishes a positive relation between normative values and human life. Rather, in being characterised by an interference between particularising and universalising modes of judgement, it testifies only to the inadequacy of its own significations, displaying its own failure to provide any certain knowledge of the nature of reality.

But Henryson's interrogation of poetry and of the controlling definitions of Scholastic literary theory addresses problems whose implications extend far beyond the restricted domain of literature, even if they are most clearly exemplified therein. Henryson conceives moral

rectitude and social order as consisting in temporal reality's being brought under the aegis of the ideal precepts of the moral law. The problematic relation between universals and particulars thus not only disrupts the significative structure of literature but also impedes the establishment of moral order and social justice. Henryson frequently provides representations in the *Fables* of the failure of persuasive discourse to produce reform and of the moral and social disorder which results from this failure. Analysis of these representations will show that the problems of poetic signification which complicate the relation of meaning to truth are a result of its participation in a general crisis of moral perception which casts doubt on the possibility of ever bringing earthly life into conformity with the order of the moral law.

2

In the final stanza of the *moralitas* of 'The Wolf and the Lamb' Henryson states his ideal of social justice in terms which reflect significantly on the problems of literary representation which he addresses. The stanza exhorts that social abuses be righted through the proper government of the king:

> God keip the lamb, quhilk is the innocent,
> From wolfis byit and men extortioneris;
> God grant that wrangous men of fals intent
> Be manifest, and punischit as effeiris;
> And God, as thow all rychteous prayer heiris,
> Mot saif our king, and gif him hart and hand
> All sic wolfis to banes of the land.
> (ll.2770-6)

Divine justice still operates on an eschatological level: 'God in his diuinite, / The wrang, the richt, of all thy werkis wait' (ll.2723-4). But there is a clear disparity between this affirmation of a transcendent justice and the negative depiction of the injustice which actually appears on earth. The stanza demands that right be established and the wicked punished temporally as well as spiritually. The repeated appeals that God bring the world into conformity with His will, concluding with the prayer that the king should act in accordance with his divinely-appointed role as admistrator of God's justice on earth, thus provide a comprehensive moral vision. Conformity to the edicts of the divinely-ordained moral law, Henryson suggests, provides the only means of

securing humanity's secular well-being. The stanza's ethical imperative maintains a clear reference to absolute standards of justice, vouchsafed by divine authority, as a touchstone of moral judgement. But these ideal imperatives are equally to be understood in their temporal implications, bringing human actions into direct conformity with the divine law and thus allowing temporal life to participate in the harmony and stability of the divine *ordo*.

These aspects of 'The Wolf and the Lamb' establish a connection between the semiotic problems posed in Henryson's treatment of literature and his social attitudes. Just as the poetic text is required to open onto ideal meanings and facilitate their application in actual life, so too does justice consist in a mediation of the moral law which should bring humanity into conformity with the divine will as manifested through that law. This connection between the mediative functions of justice and poetry is expressed by Aquinas in his comments on the nature of law and justice. For Aquinas, justice involves a proper relation of mutuality between diverse beings[5], although it can also be considered metaphorically as designating the correct ordering of the interior disposition, as in the subordination of the senses to reason[6]. In both instances, justness entails conformity to the order of right reason:

> In rebus autem humanis dicitur esse aliquid iustum ex eo quod est rectum secundum regulam rationis. [...] Unde omnis lex humanitas posita intantum habet de rectione legis, inquantum a lege naturae derivatur. Si vero in aliquo a lege naturali discordet, iam non erit lex, sed legis corruptio.
>
> (*ST*, I-II, xcv, 2, resp.)

Justice, then, requires a consonance between human actions, whether interior or exterior, and the moral imperatives of the natural law. In order to achieve this, ideal values must be mediated onto actual circumstances, both by the exercise of individual reason and by the rule of law:

> Ex praeceptis legis naturalis, quasi ex quibusdam principiis communibus et indemonstrabilibus, necesse est quod ratio humana precedat ad aliqua magis particulariter disponende.
>
> (*ST*, I-II, cxi, 3, resp.)

In the *Fables*, however, it seems doubtful whether temporal existence can in fact be harmoniously brought into conformity with the

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5. See *ST*, II-II, lvii, 1.
6. Ibid., I-II, cxiii, 1, resp.

moral law. In 'The Wolf and the Lamb' the debate which takes place in the narrative component of the fable shows the attempt to establish the rule of reason failing in the face of brute force: '"Ha", quod the volff, "thou wald intruse ressoun / Quhair wrang and reif suld duell in propertie."' (ll.2694-94) The lamb's eloquence in asserting the justice of his own position provides no defence against such intransigent corruption and superior power. The wolf in fact reduces him to inarticulacy: 'The selie lamb culd do na thing bot bleit' (l.2700). 'The Wolf and the Lamb' conforms to the dominant pattern of the *Fables*, where there is a marked and sustained disparity between the imperatives of the *moralitates* and the world of the tales where those imperatives visibly fail to be applied, and it shows in a particularly graphic manner the deleterious consequences of this failure:

> Sone wes he hedit; the volff wald do na grace;
> Syne drank his blude and off his flesche can eit
> Quhill he wes full [...].
>
> (ll.2701-3)

That the exercise of persuasive discourse can really effect the enactment of the precepts of the moral law in a manner which permits secular life to participate in the stability of the divine *ordo*, with human beings conforming to the principles of their proper action as decreed by the will of God, thus appears highly questionable.

'The Wolf and the Lamb' depicts a world in which the social institutions which should enact the divine will and serve as guarantors of order are twisted away from their proper function. The *moralitas* opens with an attack on the judicial system, construing the wolf as an example of 'fals peruerteris of the lawis', 'Smoirand the richt, garrand the wrang proceid' (l.2719). The wolf is also taken to represent 'mychtie men' whose greed leads them to oppress and exploit the poor, giving the specific example of those who use their greater economic power to oust tenants from their land (ll.2728-41). Finally, Henryson attacks landlords who exploit their tenants in order to gain extra rent and labour from them (ll.2742-62). Here, the social structure of feudalism, which should draw the different estates together in a relation of interdependence based on mutual obligation and responsibility, is shown to be corrupted. The relation between the different levels of society should be regulated by principles of justice and equity which, as the final stanza of the *moralitas*

indicates, ensure order and stability in society and accord with the divine will. Instead, the relations of power which the social hierarchy institutes are abused, being diverted from their proper function in promoting the common good. The social order thus fails as an institution of temporal justice, as it departs from the principles of right decreed in the moral law according to the rule of reason.

Henryson's concern over social abuses, particularly as carried out through the maladministration of the law, pervades the *Fables*. The fox's eagerness to take bribes in his role as arbitrator in 'The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman' (ll.2315-35), and the sheep's trial by a court composed of predators and scavengers in 'The Sheep and the Dog', provide further instances of the corruption of which Henryson complains. Fables such as these show the judicial process being perverted so that, as the sheep remarks, those who administer it '"thoill the richt go doun"' (l.1306) in order to serve their own interests[7]. The social institutions which should operate under the aegis of the moral law are diverted from their proper end by those responsible for their administration. The social disorder which the *Fables* depicts is thus presented as a consequence of humanity's lack of obedience to the divine will.

As noted above, 'The Wolf and the Lamb', along with the other socially-orientated fables in the collection, expresses a concern over the temporal as well as spiritual implications of injustice. The innocent lamb's fate is no disaster for him in eschatological terms, but Henryson's condemnation of the wolf focuses on both the innate corruption of his actions and on the evil of the suffering to which they subject their victim. The stark horror of the lamb's death combines with the specificity of the abuses which Henryson attacks in the *moralitas* to define injustice in secular as well as spiritual terms, and to demand a conformity to the divinely-ordained law which will result in social as well as moral order. This suggests that the disorder of which Henryson complains is seen as being, in principle at least, remediable. In fables such as 'The Sheep and the Dog' and 'The Wolf and the Lamb', the values of the *moralitas* appear clearly relevant to the action of the tale. Even if little hope is held out

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7. On the representation of law in these fables, see Robert Pope, 'Henryson's *The Sheep and the Dog*', *Essays in Criticism*, 30, no.2 (1980), 205-14; Craig McDonald, 'The Perversion of Law in Robert Henryson's Fable of *The Fox, The Wolf, and the Husbandsman*', *Medium Aevum*, 49 (1980), 244-53.

that these values will be put into practice, there is no doubt that they provide sound criteria for assessing the moral significance of the abuses depicted in the narrative. The ideal precepts of the moral law are only prevented from being applied in actual reality by an entrenchment in sensuality which leaves humanity impervious to the dictates of reason. This suggests that ideal moral norms are capable of being applied to actual circumstances in a manner which brings order to existence, even if in practice they fail to be enacted.

This aspect of the *Fables* reflects positively on the capacity of poetry to express a coherent vision of reality, as is indicated in the representation of the lamb's eloquence. The failure of the lamb's persuasions makes a point similar to that made by Aesop in the prologue to 'The Lion and the Mouse', in which he initially resists the narrator's request that he recount a fable:

> 'Now in this warld me think richt few or nane
> To Goddis word that hes deuotioun;
> The eir is deif, the hart is hard as stane;
> Now oppin sin without correctioun,
> The e inclynand to the eirth ay doun.
> Sa roustit is the warld with canker blak
> That now my taillis may lytill succour mak.'
> (ll.1391-97)

Pessimism with regard to the capacity of poetry to produce reform derives here from a sense of humanity's habituation to sin, an issue which Henryson also addresses in the 'Prologue' to the collection as a whole[8]:

> Na meruell is, ane man be lyke ane beist,
> Quihilk lufis ay carnall and foull delyte,
> That schame can not him ren3e nor arreist,
> But takis all the lust and appetyte,
> Quhilk throw custom and the daylie ryte
> Syne in the mynd sa fast is radicate
> That he in brutal beist is transformate.
> (ll.50-56)

The inability of poetry to repair the breach between human life and the moral law which the disparity between the world of the tales and the ideals of the *moralitates* represents is here attributed to the hard-hearted carnality of sinners. This leaves them unreceptive to the moral truths which poetry conveys, and unable to properly moderate the relation between reason and passion within themselves, or in their relation to

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8. See also 'The Fox and the Wolf', 786-88.

others. From this perspective poetry and other forms of persuasive discourse are indeed capable of providing an understanding of human actions which relates them cogently to essential moral values. The failure of rhetorical discourse, including poetry, to provide effective moral persuasion is thus attributable to its reception rather than to any congenital defect in its signings.

In this respect, the *Fables*' concern over its own moral inefficacy is a conventional one, being a recognisable characteristic of the genre[9]. This might be thought to confirm that the doubts which Henryson expresses are not incompatible with a sense of the genuine utility of fable, being harmoniously contained within the genre as one of its traditional constituents. Robert L. Kindrick in fact suggests that Henryson's depictions of the failures of persuasive representations are aimed at increasing the moral efficacy of the fables. Referring to 'The Preaching of the Swallow', he argues that the birds' refusal to heed the swallow's exhortations is designed to encourage in the fable's audience a positive response to the message about the importance of prudence[10]. Henryson's concern over the failures of rhetorical discourse is thus incorporated within a strategy which affirms its value as a persuasive force for moral order.

Other aspects of the *Fables*, however, suggest that the disconsonance between temporal reality and the moral law is a far more intractable problem than this, and that the factors which produce it are such as to radically undermine the capacity of poetic signification to provide any positive knowledge of reality. Poetry is in fact frequently used to emblematise an obscuring of moral vision which leads to the very abuses which Henryson attacks. The fables construct the inability to relate sensible reality to intelligible values not only as sensuality, but also as textuality. The common designation of fable and fox as 'fen*3*eit' has already been noted (above, Ch.3, p.117). The *moralitas* of 'The Wolf and the Lamb' refers to 'fals peruertiris of the lawis, / Quhilk vnder poleit termis falset mingis' (ll.2715-16). This recalls the reference in the

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9. On the doubt expressed in the *Fables* over its capacity to produce reform, see Fox (ed.), *Poems*, pp.lxxviii-lxxxi. On the relation of this doubt to Aesopic tradition, particularly with reference to the widely-known *Life of Aesop*, see Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp.26-31.

10. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, pp.247-48.

'Prologue' to the 'polite termis of sweit rhetore' (l.3) and directly connects the perversion of human law, which turns it away from the law of nature, with the workings of poetic language. Features such as these suggest that poetry in its very constitution entails a disruption of knowledge which leaves it unfitted to the task of producing moral reform.

The *Fables*' pessimism as to the capacity of literature to produce moral reform, then, does not merely result from a sense of humanity's habituation to sin. A major and even more intractable distortion of perception results from the problems of representation discussed above. Poetic discourse is presented as exemplary, the failure of its signings typifying a general crisis of epistemology which leads not merely to a disruption of literary signification, but to moral and social disorder as well.

3

Many of Henryson's depictions of persuasive discourse in the *Fables* suggest that its failure is a necessary result of the disproportionate relation between the universal and the particular, which problematises the determination of the moral significance of particular actions and calls into question the capacity of absolute precepts to bring order to worldly life. In 'The Preaching of the Swallow', the exhortations of the swallow are no more effective than the arguments of the lamb in 'The Wolf and the Lamb'. The *moralitas* of 'The Preaching' constructs the unreceptiveness of the birds as a result of habituation to sin, emblematised in their allowing the seed to grow:

> Proceding furth be vse and consuetude,
> The sin rypis, and schame is set on syde [...].
> (ll.1909-10)

The tale, however, ascribes the birds' rejection of the swallow's advice not to the wilfulness of sin, but to the weakness of their vision.

The fable opens with a contrast between 'The hie prudence and wirking meruelous, / The profound wit off God omnipotent' (ll.1622-23), and 'mannis saull', which 'is febill and ouer small, / off vnderstanding waik and vnperfite / To comprehend him that contenis all' (ll.1644-46). The narrator proceeds to counter this sense of distance between human

and divine vision with an affirmation of the *via positiva* whereby God can be known through his works:

> The firmament payntit with sternis cleir
> From eist to west rolland in cirkill round,
> And euerilk planet in his proper spheir,
> In mouing makand harmonie and sound;
> The fyre, the watter, and the ground -
> Till vnderstand it is aneuch, I wis,
> That God in all his werkis wittie is.
> (ll.1657-63)

This is combined with an extensive description of the progress of the seasons from summer to spring, in which the narrator states that humanity should be able to find 'ilk sesoun / Concorddand till our opportunitie, / As daylie be experience we may see' (ll.1676-77). This description implies a beneficent divine order which operates not only on a spiritual level, but is also perceptible in the material world.

Certain aspects of the seasonal description, however, raise doubts as to the authority of this evocation of a divine order manifested in creation. Winter is afforded greater emphasis than the other seasons, having two stanzas devoted to it, while the others have only one. In anticipating the wintry setting of final tragic action of the fable, this suggests on the narrator's part an awareness that the ideal vision of the world as manifesting a divine order is compromised by the negative elements of experience in which that order fails to be realised, as illustrated in the narrative's chilling conclusion.

The fate of the birds is recounted with sympathy and horror:

> Allace, it wes grit hart sair for to se
> That bludie bowcheour beit thay birdis doun,
> And for till heir, quhen thay wist weill to de,
> Thair cairfull sang and lamentatioun.
> (ll.1874-77)

The narrator's pity for the birds is enhanced by an emphasis on their weakness and helplessness: 'Thir small birdis, for hunger famischit neir' (ll.1867). This recalls the characterisation of the human soul in the opening section of the fable. The fable thus reinscribes a sense that the weakness of corporeal perception hampers the birds' capacity to grasp the true significance of their own actions, and prevents them from adopting a mode of conduct which will see the divine order directly manifested in temporal life. This undermines the narrator's assertion that 'we may haif

knawlegeing / Off God almichtie be his creatouris' (ll.1650-51), which appears as rather too pat a dismissal of the problem.

The narrative confirms that the birds' failure to bring their lives into conformity with the divine order is a result of an uncertainty which makes it well nigh impossible to arrive at a sure determination of an action's true nature. John Burrow has pointed out the fable's concern with the theme of prudence, a virtue which is concerned to apply universals to particulars, determining the essential nature of present moral actions by relating them to past actions and to their future implications, and thus shadowing the atemporal vision of God[11]. The fable, however, is as much a problematisation of prudence as a recommendation of it. Burrow points to the lark's deployment in ll.1764-68 of 'a string of anti-prudential proverbs' (p.33) as evidence that the birds reject the swallow's advice through folly. Yet the fable also indicates that the birds' refusal to heed the swallow is itself motivated by prudential considerations. Certainly, they have 'bot lytill thocht / Off perrell that mycht fall be auenture' (ll.1818-19). But this is because they aim to provide against hunger and want which, as the fable itself illustrates, will come inevitably, and not merely 'be auenture':

> '*3*one lint heirefter will do gude,
> For linget is to lytill birdis fude.
>
> 'We think, quhen that *3*one lint bollis ar ryip,
> To mak vs feist and fill vs odd the seid,
> Magre *3*one churll, and on it sing and pyip.'
> (ll.1809-6)

Burrow comments thus:

> Such optimism is a form of self-delusion, what Henryson earlier calls 'fantasy', because the future generally brings change for the worse. The joy and prosperity of spring and summer are followed by the misery and deprivation of winter, While there is still time, the prudent man will 'be ware' and 'provide before'. In this way he may avert, or at least reduce, the dangers facing him in the future.
> (pp.33-34)

But it is precisely in providing defence against future deprivations that the birds refuse to eat the flax immediately, so that it may serve as a source of food later. In the light of the certain onset of the hardships of winter, this seems a rational decision. Indeed, the swallow's arguments

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11. See John Burrow, 'Henryson's "Preaching of the Swallow"', *Essays in Criticism*, 25, no.1 (1975), 25-37 (pp.30-35).

against deferring gratification appears in these terms to recommend a course of action which is the very opposite of prudence, having no thought for the future.

The problem, then, is not the birds' lack of prudence. Rather, it is the fact that the nature of a particular action is obscured by its having a range of possible implications which point in different directions and complicate judgement. Conduct which is wise in some contexts, is foolish in others. Any determination of the value of a particular course of action is thus necessarily caught up in a difficult interpretative process in which the relationship between things and the significances attached to them is uncertain, so that the understanding is mired in perplexity and constantly exposed to the risk of error. The distinction between truth and lies, fact and fiction, is blurred, and the understanding, its capacity for discernment thus hampered, is left open to manipulation by mendacious representations.

The difficulty of transcending the complex particular resonances of actions to grasp their intelligible nature is imaged not just in the fable's narrative action, but also in the relation between tale and *moralitas*, which is characterised by a tension between sympathy and judgement. The *moralitas* has nothing of the narrator's piteous response to the birds' predicament. Instead it condemns them in straightforward terms, constructing their failure to heed the swallow's advice as worldliness which leads to damnation (ll.1902-1908, 1930-36). The narrative similarly recognises that the birds' existence is disconsonant with the divine order, as indicated by the disparity between the positive movement of the seasons from summer to spring in the opening passages and the negative movement from spring to winter in the story. But the pity with which the narrator views their fate involves an awareness of the constraints of physical need and weak understanding which underlie their actions. The narrator's sensitivity to such factors questions the appropriateness of the *moralitas* with its emphasis on wickedness and sin which concentrates merely on the fact of their error, and its neglect of the circumstances which explain and mitigate that error.

In this, the fable itself partakes of the same disordered perception which the birds display in the tale and which hinders their capacity for right judgement, the main difference being that no resolution of the interpretative difficulties raised by the tale/*moralitas* relation is

proffered. Unlike the situation in the tale, the rights and wrongs of the competing perspectives are never established. Even as the fable's action affirms the urgent need to bring human life into consonance with the moral order, the tension between the response of the narrator and the perspective of the *moralitas* testifies to the difficulty of grasping how moral norms apply to circumstances whose complexity problematises the question of how they are to be understood. God may know 'the wrang, the richt' of all our works, but such things are not so evident to humanity. In its depiction of the Swallow's failure to persuade and the consequences thereof, the fable affirms the need for a moral certitude which it itself is unable to provide.

A similar situation occurs in 'The Fox and the Wolf', which draws with particular clarity the relation between the 'fen3eit fox' and the 'fen3eit termis textuall' of poetry. Here the problem is not, as in the 'Preaching', the failure of true representations to effect moral persuasion through their veracity being obscured. Rather it is the power of false images to affect one's actions by being substituted for truth. Lowrence's rebaptism of the kid as a salmon in an attempt to avoid the penance of abstention from meat set in his imperfect confession (ll.747-53), provides a comic depiction of language's capacity to misrepresent the nature of things, and of the delusions attendant on the understanding's being governed solely by signs. The fox, remarking on the fact that he has been shot immediately after his jesting remark, 'Vpon this wame set wer ane bolt full meit' (l.760), observes that one cannot make a joke nowadays without someone taking it seriously (ll.769-70). This itself is a joke which has serious import. The real nature of things may be obscured by the deceptive power of words, but that nature remains intransigent. Lowrence may call the kid a salmon, but it is still a kid. He may consider that the scenario of retributory justice can be jokingly evoked, having no actual bearing on his life, but its imminence is all too real. The fable reminds one indeed that 'God in his diuinitie / The wrang, the richt, of all thy werkis wait', and urges the need to transcend the arbitrary and illusory significances which language obtrudes between the true nature and consequences of those works and the human understanding of them.

The fable inscribes these issues and imperatives in its own significative structure. The fox is depicted throughout as an engaging character. Even his murder of the kid is passed over lightly, made the

object of a joke, and depicted with none of the grimness which characterises the slaughter of the birds in 'The Preaching of the Swallow', the murder of the lamb in 'The Wolf and the Lamb', or the stark disembowelling which concludes 'The Paddock and the Mouse'. The game, energetic qualities which Lowrence displays, jesting even in death, give him a roguish appeal which jars with the *moralitas*' wholly unsympathetic account of him as a hardened sinner, unable to repent. This form of disjunction is a consistent feature of the Reynardian fables, where the fox's colourful character is construed in the *moralitas* variously, but with a consistently censorious emphasis, as emblematising worldly good, the temptation of worldly pleasures, and the devil himself[12]. Even in 'The Trial of the Fox', where the fables' bipartite structure is disrupted by the intrusion of a moralising voice into the tale, this only serves to highlight the lack of congruence between the impression given by the cheerful disrespect with which the fox treats his father's corpse and the moralising execration of his covetousness, lack of filial piety, and worldliness (ll.810-37).

The disjunction between these sympathetic and judgemental perspectives reflects negatively on both. On the one hand, the *moralitas* indicates that the tale's depiction of the fox remains rooted in *sensibilia*, losing sight of the intelligible moral essences which should serve as a guide to understanding. The *moralitas* also comments on the morality of reading, warning against the deceptiveness of the tale's 'fei3nit termis textuall' which give a delusive impression of the fox, just as Lowrence himself manipulates language to create a false image of his own actions. The poetic text provides a perspective shaped merely by signs whose meaning remains divorced from the true nature of things.

It is not, however, clear that the tension between these perspectives can be so easily resolved in favour of the *moralitas*. As critics such as H.E. Tolliver, Daniel M. Murtaugh, and George Clark, have argued, albeit with different emphases, the sympathy of the tales comments on the harshness of the *moralitates*, rather than, or as well as, vice versa[13]. In 'The Preaching of the Swallow', the narrator's sympathy is not merely based on a neglect of the wisdom of the *moralitas*, but is

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12. See 'The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger', ll.2210-20; 'The Trial of the Fox', ll.1132-38; 'The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman', ll.2431-33, respectively.

13. See above, Ch.3, pp.105-6.

much more carefully considered. It is based on an awareness of the constraints of vision and circumstance which affect the birds' actions: the uncertainty of future contingencies which leads them not only to reject the swallow's advice but to provide for the future in a different way from what he suggests, and the hunger which compels them to scrape among the chaff which the fowler lays for them as a trap. These considerations complicate the birds' actions, introducing dimensions not considered in the *moralitas* so that, erroneous as those actions may be in terms of their worldly implications, it is not clear that they are morally condemnable in absolute terms.

A similar consideration of circumstance characterises the representation of Lowrence in 'The Fox and the Wolf'. The depiction of the wolf as a friar, 'Freir Volff Waitskaith' (l.667), introduces a strong element of anti-clerical satire into the fable. The fox outlines the pastoral role which the clergy are expected to perform in society:

> '3e ar the lanterne and the sicker way
> Suld gyde sic sempill folk as ne to grace [...].'
> (ll.677-78)

The distance between the ideal and the reality is evident in the absurdity of having a wolf in a pastoral role, but is also illustrated in the confession of Lowrence. The lupine friar absolves the fox of his sins, announcing that 'heir I reik the full remissioun' (l.725), despite the fact that the confession had been imperfect, with the fox lacking contrition and refusing to resolve to avoid sin in future.

Henryson's depiction of the clergy here brings to mind the point which Sir David Lindsay makes in *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Esaitis* when Wantonnes counsels the king thus:

> Beleive ye, Sir, that lecherie be sin?
> Na, trow nocht that! This is my ressoun quhy:
> First at the Romane [court] will ye begin,
> Quhilk is the lemand lamp of lecher [...].
> (ll. 235-38)

The clergy's tolerance or even active espousal of sin, given that it is to them that one looks for moral guidance and example, makes moral evils appear acceptable to the laity and misleads them as to the true significance of their own actions. Reading 'The Fox and the Wolf' with an eye to these matters, and recognising that Lowrence's inability to reform is exacerbated by such conditions, strengthens the sympathy with which

the text invites one to view his behaviour and makes his error appear understandable, suggesting that simple condemnation is not an appropriate response.

The *moralitas*, however, takes no account of the circumstantial constraints on moral understanding and activity which the narrative highlights. Its judgement of the fox remains implacably based on absolute principles, defining his imperfect confession as an instance of wilful depravity:

> For mony gois now to confessioun
> Can not repent, nor for their sinnis greit,
> Because thay think thair lustie lyfe sa sweit.
> (ll.779-81)

Assigning Lowrence's inability to repent or promise to forego further sin to 'consuetude and ryte' (l.782), the *moralitas* wholly disregards the tale's attention to the failure of the clergy to provide moral guidance, ignoring the fact that the wolf has encouraged Lowrence to believe that the attitudes with which he approaches confession are acceptable and that he has been granted absolution. The narrative's foregrounding of the external factors which deceive Lowrence's understanding questions the authority of the essentialising judgement of the *moralitas*, making its straightforward condemnation appear insensitive to the temporal complexities by which actions are necessarily circumscribed.

The narrative's consideration of circumstance, however, appears to have equally dubious implications. In 'The Preaching', the birds are shown to have been misled by circumstantial considerations parallel to those which lead the narrator to adopt a view that jars with the *moralitas*. This raises doubts over the wisdom of the narrator's perspective, suggesting that his failure to respect the absolute decrees of the moral law perpetuates an outlook which leads to confusion and error in this life, and damnation in the next. Similarly, in 'The Fox and the Wolf', the suggestion in the narrative that Lowrence's imperfect confession need not be met with moral condemnation parallels the wolf's rather liberal failure to condemn Lowrence and make clear to him the conditions he must meet if he desires absolution and salvation.

Moreover, in questioning the *moralitas*' insistence that the proper reception of the sacrament is an essential and non-negotiable criterion for salvation (this being the orthodox position of the Catholic church, then as

now[14]), and suggesting that its necessity for the remission of sin can be countermanded by the exigencies of circumstance, the narrative repeats the obfuscation of absolute laws which is responsible for leading the fox into error in the first place. These aspects of the fables lend urgency to the *moralitates*' negative reflection on the tales' attention to the mitigations of local circumstance. They reinforce the suggestion that such attention is a source of moral confusion which obscures the relation between ideal values and actual reality and leads to the delusive perceptions of the fox, the friar/wolf, and the birds in 'The Preaching'.

Indeed, 'The Fox and the Wolf' establishes an analogy between the sympathetic outlook of the narrative and the wolf's perversion of the sacrament of penance. According to Aquinas, 'sacramenta necessaria sunt ad humanam salutem inquantum sunt quaedam sensibilia signa invisibilium rerum quibus homo sanctificatur.' (*ST*, III, q.61, art.3, resp.) He observes that the condition of human nature

> est ut per corporalia et sensibilia in spiritualia et intelligibilia deducatur. [...] Nam si spirituali nuda ei proponerentur, eius animus applicari non posset, corporalibus deditus.
> (Ibid., art.1, resp.)

The confession which Lowrence makes is one in which the corporeal signs of the ritual, stripped of any spiritual significance by the wolf, mislead him as to the true significance of his actions. The narrative's foregrounding of contingent, contextual considerations similarly assigns Lowrence's actions a significance in which their disconsonance with absolute laws is marginalised as a judgemental criterion. This suggests that, as with the wolf's imperfect administration of the sacrament of confession, the tale's focus on temporal, causal relations embroils the understanding in signs which are devoid of any underlying substance, and which obstruct the proper grasp of the ideal moral norms which should govern our understanding of reality.

The different perspectives presented in the fable, then, are juxtaposed in a mutually destabilising manner, each reflecting critically on the other. Henryson offers no means of either reconciling or choosing between them. The fable leaves judgement suspended, its narrative refusing to yield up any positive *sententia*. This impasse of judgement,

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14. On the necessity of penance to salvation, see Aquinas, *ST*, III, q. 65, art.4, resp.

which leaves the understanding unable to distinguish between true and false signs, reinforces the delusory power of Lowrence's false representations, obstructing the right understanding of the moral implications of actions when seen in the light of the moral law.

The tension between secularly and transcendently orientated modes of judgement has dramatic social ramifications in 'The Wolf and the Wether'. The *moralitas* to this fable constructs the wether's folly as figuring the presumptuousness of those who seek to rise above their station:

> Thairfoir I counsell men of euerilk stait
> To knaw thame self, and quhome thay suld forbeir,
> And fall not with thair better in debait [...].
> (ll.2609-11)

Such actions are condemned as a disruption of social order, blurring the proper hierarchical relation between different ranks in society as 'pure men' 'counterfute ane lord in all degre' (2598), and 'lychtlie lordis in thair deidis' (l.2604).

But the significance attached to the wether's actions in the tale do not entirely support this reading, and in fact reflect critically on the *moralitas*' conception of the social order. While the wether certainly descends into folly with the announcement that 'It is not the lamb, bot the, that I desyre' (l.2535), his initial enterprise appears commendable[15]. Henryson stresses the helplessness of the shepherd upon the death of his dog and his distress at the threat that he will lose his livelihood with nothing to protect his flock from predators (2469-75), and foregrounds the diligence of the wether in carrying out his new guard duty and the initial success of his enterprise (ll.2497-510). The *moralitas*, however, proffers a wholesale condemnation of the wether's disregard of the social order which neither recognises the virtuous aspects of his conduct nor considers the consequences which would otherwise have ensued from the dog's death. These evident exclusions mean that the *moralitas* offers no rebuttal of the initial positive impression of the wether. It simply ignores the considerations which give that impression.

In the relation between the tale and the *moralitas* of 'The Wolf and the Wether' Henryson again presents a disjunction between worldly-

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15. See I.W.A. Jamieson, 'Henryson's *Taill of the Wolf and the Wedder*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6, no.4 (1969), 248-57 (pp.249-54); Newlyn, 'Affective Style', 49-50.

orientated and idealising modes of judgement. The *moralitas* counsels respect for the established social hierarchy as an absolute precept, to be heeded regardless of context. This hierarchy is presented as naturally ordained, inherent in the order of things. The *moralitas* assumes a difference between 'pure men' and 'ane lord' (ll.2596, 2598), and between those of lowly estate and 'thair better' (l.2600), which is as clearly established as the biological difference between the wether and the wolf in the tale. The wether, had he taken the *moralitas*' advice, would be commended for bringing himself into conformity with an ideal and natural order, and with acting in accordance with justice by observing his own status and his proper relation to others. But it is equally clear that such conformity to an ideal would lead in actual terms to injustice, denying the flock any protection from predators who would be left free to rob and kill as they pleased. Paradoxically, then, it is through a breach of the absolute precepts of the moral law that justice is actually established, and an equitable relation between different groups preserved. Conversely, conformity to an ideal principle of justice leads to actual injustice and promotes social disorder and exploitation. In these circumstances at least, the discontinuity between the particular and universal resonances of things appears to be such as to deny absolute precepts any value whatsoever as a principle of temporal order.

Henryson certainly attempts to deal with this problem in a manner which can preserve a sense of the worldly value of transcendent moral norms. Throughout the *Fables* he urges the powerful to cease their exploitation and to accept the ethical responsibilities of their position. In appealing to the authority of the king in 'The Wolf and the Lamb' he seeks a legitimate means of enforcement which can be applied to 'mychtie men' and which can compensate for the disempowerment of the poor, as the king can protect their interests and take action against nobles and other powerful figures without being seen to disrupt the social order. But while in these respects the *Fables* looks forward to a reconciliation between ideal precepts and human life it provides no resolution of the interpretative problems presented in 'The Wolf and the Wether'. In the situation which the tale depicts, the wether's conformity to his prescribed role within the hierarchical ordering of things would result in a temporal disorder which his disruption of the hierarchy serves to prevent. The question of whether his presumptuousness in taking on the role of the

dog is to be wholly condemned as an offence against the dictates of the moral law, or whether the circumstances permit him to be viewed as praiseworthy, in his initial conduct at least, is left unresolved. Again, the fable yields no clear moral *sententia*, but rather testifies to the uncertainty which attaches to particular actions as a consequence of the problematic application of ideal norms in actual circumstances.

'The Wolf and the Wether' presents an analogy between disorder in poetic signification and social disorder. The *moralitas* construes the presumptuousness which it condemns as a privileging of appearance over substance, whereby 'riches of array' (l.2595) leads people to 'counterfute' their betters (l.2598). The true nature of things is obscured by false signs. This aspect of the *moralitas* reflects on the temporally-orientated understanding of the narrative. As preoccupation with 'riches of array' constitutes a fixation on appearances which undermines the proper perception of one's true status and leads to the disruption of the social order, so too concern over the sensible dimensions of the wether's actions obscures a proper grasp of their real nature defined in relation to the absolute moral law. As the former threatens social stabililty, so the latter threatens the stability of meaning as the text produces a significance which denies moral precepts any universal validity and whose judgements are determined solely according to localised considerations. Both social and poetic disorder are attributed to a concern with veneers which obscures a proper sense of the realities which underlie the signs.

Yet the fable also shows that conformity to ideal ethical principles, far from realising the stability of the divine *ordo* on earth, can in given situations actually exacerbate worldly disorder and lead to greater suffering on the part of the innocent. The tale's conclusion shows not only the reassertion of the order which the wether had disrupted, but also of the tyranny of the wolf, against which there is now no protection (and it is perhaps significant that this fable is immediately followed by 'The Wolf and the Lamb'). The worldly-orientated mode of signification which undermines the stability of both meaning and society, also appears to be the only one capable of adapting to circumstances so as to produce value-judgements that provide for some degree of actual order in society. This facilitates greater particular reference and actual utility, and reflects negatively on the *moralitas*' idealising mode of judgement. The abstractive *sententiae* of the *moralitas* are shown to fail to address the

exigencies of temporal existence, their inadequate applicability to circumstances undermining the ethical applicability to circumstances which is necessary if they are to have any positive material effect in the world.

But the fable also indicates that this applicability can only be achieved by compromising universal reference and depriving both meaning and the social order of any legitimising ideal basis. 'The Wolf and the Wether' thus presents an image of a social disorder whose irreducible nature is figured in the poem's disjunctive significative structure, which testifies to the fable's failure to provide any satisfactory criteria for establishing moral and social order.

All of the fables discussed above express an inability to establish a perspective in which a focus on the significance which human actions accrue in their temporal dimensions can be harmoniously conjoined with attention to that which derives from their ideal resonances. The former emphasis provides a mode of vision which, in adapting meaning according to the exigencies of circumstance, becomes dissociated from any absolute values. The latter emphasis results in an abstractive perspective which, while maintaining reference to regulatory moral norms, provides no guidance as to how they are to be brought to bear in various particular contexts. In order to sustain their pre-eminence in moral judgement it is forced to dismiss from consideration any worldly aspects of human actions which contest the authority of such absolute determinations. The result, as displayed in the tension between sympathy and judgement which so often characterises the tale/*moralitas* relation in the *Fables*, is to cast doubt on the validity of both modes of judgement. The significances adduced in each are shown to provide only partial representations of reality. The knowledge they produce is arrived at only through an interpretative process of discrimination and exclusion. They provide *sententiae* whose incapacity to encompass within their referential scope the universal and particular resonances of reality leaves the human understanding always open to doubt and error in being unable to transcend the uncertainties of signs.

These fables, in their juxtaposition of sympathy and judgement, embody the tension between the idealising and affective emphases of Scholastic literary theory. The obscurity of vision which plagues the characters in the fables, impeding their capacity to determine the truth

or falsehood of different representations of their actions, reflects outwardly on the disjunction between narrative and *moralitas*, which inscribes that same uncertainty in the structure of the fables themselves. For Henryson, the power of poetry to communicate truth is disabled by a general disruption of moral perception. The interference between modes of judgement based on circumstantial and absolute considerations results from the ontological and epistemological privilege afforded to the individual in the later Middle Ages, which prevents a thing's nature from being reducible within universal categories. That Henryson's commitment to both the key imperatives of Scholastic theory should undermine literature's capacity to convey truth, leading to a sense of meaning's being breached from reality, testifies to the extent to which the Scholastic conception of literature has become unsustainable.

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Henryson's concern over the disruption of meaning which occurs in poetry is qualitatively different from that expressed by early-medieval thinkers. The earlier attitude towards imaginative writing distinguished such discourse as a special linguistic case in which the proper relation between sign and meaning that operated in ordinary discursive language was distorted. For Henryson, however, poetic signification is undermined by its participation in a larger ontological and epistemological crisis which affects moral judgement in general. Furthermore, early-medieval concerns were largely founded on a concern over literature's foregrounding of the contingent basis of meaning. Henryson certainly retains this suspicion towards the suggestion that meaning is merely materially-grounded. But his work equally expresses reservations about universalised *sententiae* which themselves take on a figmentary quality. The disruption of signification which literature presents derives from the interference between the material and transcendent significances, and involves a recognition of the relative inadequacies and virtues of both. Again, this suggests that the problem is not one proper to poetry, but derives from the general sense of the disproportion between universals and particulars which developed in late-medieval philosophy. Indeed, the fables' depictions of the failures and abuses of rhetoric, legal argument, preaching, and even the sacraments, show that the problem is one which

poetry expresses rather than produces. Yet Henryson retains an aspect of the early-medieval view which would seem to run counter to this emphasis. He constructs poetry as embodying a sensual outlook which distorts moral perception, and he assigns it an exemplary status which makes it not merely one among a number of discourses which have become problematic but places it at the very core of the problems of representation which he addresses.

Henryson's view of poetry as an exemplar of deficient moral judgement is imaged in the final fable: 'The Paddock and the Mouse'. The *moralitas* in this fable urges that one should beware of being misled by false appearances and delusory signs:

> Ane fals intent vnder ane fair pretence
> Hes causit mony innocent for to de;
> Grit folie is to gif ouer sone credence
> To all that speiks fairlie vnto the;
> Ane silkin toung, ane hart of crueltie,
> Smytis more soir than ony schot of arrow;
> Brother, gif thow be wyse, I reid the fle
> To matche the with ane thrawart fen*3*eit marrow.
> (ll.2918-21)

The tale, however, suggests that this is easier said than done. The mouse is in fact suspicious of the toad, reading her appearance as a sign of deceitfulness: '"Giff I can ony skill of phisnomy, / Thow hes sumpart off falset and inuy."' (ll.2824-25)[16] Yet, as Robert Pope has shown, even if one accepts the validity of physiognomic analysis, it can still be misleading. Pope points out that the section on physiognomy in the *Secreta Secretorum* is prefaced by a cautionary tale in which the disciples of Hippocrates become outraged when a physiognomist declares a picture of their master to be lecherous and a deceiver. When they report this to Hippocrates himself, he replies that it is true, but that he had exercised himself to overcome his evil disposition. 'It was clearly possible', Pope observes, 'to belie one's physical appearance by an effort of the Spirit.'[17] The mouse, then, has no certain means of discerning whether the impression of the toad which she forms from outward appearances is accurate or not.

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16. That the mouse here accurately applies physiognomical tradition is demonstrated by Robert Pope in 'A Sly Toad, Physiognomy, and the Problem of Deceit: Henryson's *The Paddock and the Mous*', *Neophilologus*, 63 (1979), 461-68 (pp.463-64).

17. Ibid., 466-67 (p.467).

Moreover, in affirming his trustworthiness, the toad expresses contempt for all forms of deception in tones which echo the warning of the *moralitas* in insisting that one should not judge by merely superficial criteria:

> 'Off sum the face may be full flurischand,
> Off silkin toung and cheir rycht amorous,
> With mynd inconstant, fals, and wariand,
> Full of desait and menis cautelous.'
> (ll.2847-50)

That the toad should employ the very advice propounded in the *moralitas* problematises the task of proper discernment yet further: the counsels of virtue can themselves be employed to mislead. The *moralitas*' simple imperative that one should beware of falsehood provides no indication as to how one is to distinguish truth from mendacity when the understanding must negotiate among conflicting signs whose relation to substances is not evident. And yet the fable's brutal conclusion stresses the urgency of arriving at correct judgement, showing the dreadful consequences of failing to do so.

The *moralitas* sets the problem of right discernment within the opposition of the soul and the body, the former striving to embrace spiritual things, the latter drawing it towards the false good of carnality (ll.2934-2961). 'The Paddock and the Mouse' connects this opposition directly to the interpretative difficulties which beset the *Fables*, evoking the traditional construction of the flesh as the signs of the text and the spirit its inward *sententia*. The mouse's desire to reach the far bank is explained in the tale in terms which echo the imagery with which the 'Prologue' describes fable:

> 'Seis thow', quod scho, 'Off corne 3one iolie flat,
> Off ryip aitis, off barlie, peis and queheit?
> I am hungrie, and fane wald be thair at,
> But I am stoppit be this watter greit;
> And on this syde I get na thing till eit
> Bot hard nuttis, quhilkis with my teith I bore:
> Wer I be3ond. my feist wer fer the more.
> (ll.2791-97)

The abundance of the far fields recalls the comparison of the *sententia* of fable to corn 'Hailsum and gude to mannis sustenance' (ll.10-12), and the 'doctrine wyse aneuch / And full of frute' which is concealed beneath the 'nuttis schell', 'hard and teuch' (ll.15-18). In the *moralitas* the far bank represents heaven and spiritual reward:

> The saull rycht fane wald be brocht ouer, I wis,
> Out of this warld into the heuinnis blis.
> (ll.2960-61)

The relation between the narrative, the *moralitas*, and the 'Prologue' establishes a chain of associations wherein the obscurity of vision which leads the mouse to be deceived by the toad is linked to the subjection of the soul to sensuality, and to the difficulty of deriving an authoritative *sententia* from the fables. This conjoins with other references in the *Fables*, to the 'fen*3*eit' text, and to the 'poleit termis' of the perverters of the law, to associate a general obscuring of moral perception with poetic signification. The uncertainty which attaches to ethical determinations and the consequent exposure of the understanding to the immanent risk of error is consistently referred back to the obfuscatory and deceptive character of poetry. This aspect of the *Fables* does not simply depict poetry as participating in a general disruption of moral judgement. Henryson's emphasis also suggests that this disruption can be viewed as a general extension of poetic signification which makes it the defining model of a fractured moral perception.

This construction of poetic signification as the paradigm for the problems of representation which lead to moral and social disorder also appears in 'The Lion and the Mouse'. This is the only one of the fables in which the ideals of the *moralitas* are seen to operate in the world of the tale, and where rational persuasion is seen to be successful. The lion's ability to think and act 'according to ressoun' (l.1504) in accordance with the prompting of the mouse ensures a harmonious relation between king and subjects which is conducive to the maintenance of the social order, resulting in a positive outcome to the fable. Like the *Testament of Cresseid*, 'The Lion and the Mouse' constructs a model of signification in which the text recommends a set of values whose virtue is defined both in absolute terms with reference to the *a priori* moral law, and in terms of their pragmatic secular worth. The *moralitas*' explication of the fable encompasses both of these dimensions. The underlying cause of the lion's initial lack of vigilance, and of the general failure of rulers 'to reule and steir the land, and justice keip', is defined as sensuality: the *moralitas* associates such behaviour with 'lustis', 'the warld and his prosperitie', 'fals plesance' (ll.1580-86). Equally, considerable emphasis is placed on

the fact that such behaviour has negative temporal consequences, resulting in disorder and rebellion in the realm:

> Thir lytill myis ar bot the commountie,
> Wantoun, vnwyse, without correctioun;
> Thair lordis and princis quhen that thay se
> Of iustice mak nane executioun,
> Thay dreid na thing to mak rebellioun
> And disobey, for quhy thay stand nane aw,
> That garris thame thair soueranis misknaw.
> (ll.1587-1600)

The value of wise and proper administration of justice on the part of rulers thus consists in its bringing them into conformity with their divinely-appointed role and hence with the divine will, and in the social stability which is shown to result from this conformity. The *moralitas*' emphasis on fortune, and on the power of the values which it recommends to protect against its vicissitudes (ll.1601-7), suggests an organic relation between these two levels of significance, much as was seen in the *Testament*. Temporal instability is seen as a consequence of a moral disorder which places one out of harmony with the divine will as expressed through the moral law. Conformity to that law results in a participation in the divine will which sees something of its order and stability established on earth.

The mode of signification proposed in 'Lion and the Mouse' thus retains reference to ideal norms *per simplice*, and affirms that diverse particular actions can be assimilated within them. The *moralitas* expressly indicates that the *sententia* which it propounds has a normative value which extends its reference across a range of specific contexts. The lion 'May signifie ane prince or emperiour, / Ane potestate, or 3it ane king with croun' (ll.1574-75). Aesop's moralisation concludes with a gesture which leaves further particularisations of the general precepts of the *moralitas* to the audience:

> Mair till expound, as now, I lett allane,
> Bot king and lord may weill wit quhat I mene:
> Figure heirof oftymis hes bene sene.
> (ll.1612-14)

The interpretative approach which these lines invite is admirably displayed in the various modern allegorical readings of the fable, in which a range of precise historical reference to events in the reign of James III

have been proposed[18]. The fable is designed to communicate values whose normative status makes them applicable in diverse contexts, without having their authority restricted to or solely defined within any one set of circumstances. In this, 'The Lion and the Mouse' proposes a means of understanding the relation between general norms and diverse particulars which conforms to that described by Aquinas:

> Dicendum quod quia infinitas singularium non potest ratione humana comprehendi, inde est quod sunt 'incertae providentae nostrae', ut dicitur Sap.ix [Wis. 9:14]. Tamen per experientiam singularia infinita reducuntur ad aliqua finita quae ut in pluribus accidunt, quorum cognitio sufficit ad prudentiam humanam.
> (*ST*, II-II, q.xlvii, art.3, ad.2)

The narrative of 'The Lion and the Mouse' provides an image of the general rule according to which the values it propounds apply across various circumstances. Further and more highly particularised determinations are left to the readers, who are encouraged to relate those values to whatever situations are closest to their own experience.

'The Lion and the Mouse' thus posits an unproblematic relation between particular situations and universal precepts in which the former, being readily intelligible in the light of the latter, are open to an assimilation thereto which allows actual reality to participate in the stability of ideal principles of order. The fable communicates simple absolute values while still being able to address and resolve the uncertainties of worldly life. This faith in the capacity of the actual to be raised to the level of the ideal, and of the ideal to be actually manifested, is also evident from the fact that the fable continues the heuristic emphasis seen in 'The Cock and the Jasp'. Aesop begins the *moralitas* with the words 'As I suppois' (l.1573), emphasising the provisionality of the interpretation he offers and leaving the fable open to other possible readings, according to the varying ethical priorities of different readers.

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18. On the historical reference of 'The Lion and the Mouse', see Marshall W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp.16-18; Robert L. Kindrick, 'Lion or Cat?: Henryson's Characterization of James III', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 14 (1979), 123-35 (pp.128-31); John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp.170-73); Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974), pp.508-9. For reservations about such precise political allegorisation, with specific reference to 'The Lion and the Mouse', see R.J. Lyall, 'Politics and Poetry in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Scotland' *Scottish Literary Journal*, 3 (1976), no.2, 5-29 (pp.7-10); Steven R. McKenna, 'Legends of James III and the Problem of Henryson's Topicality', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 17 (1990), no.1, 5-19 (pp.11-12).

Henryson extends the text's significance so as to encompass readings which break the organic relation between tale and *moralitas* whereby the practical resonances of ideal values are displayed. In doing so he expresses a conviction as to his audience's ability to construct *sententiae* in view of their own moral requirements. The audience is seen as being readily capable of assimilating ideal values, arriving at a material grasp of their virtue, and perceiving their pertinence to their own lives.

'The Lion and the Mouse' has nothing of the *Testament*'s sensitivity to the tensions between idealising and concretising modes of judgement. The fable expresses a sure faith in the possibility of discerning the ideal resonances of concrete actions, and of assimilating contingent reality within the frame of absolute norms in a manner which provides a clear means of addressing and resolving the uncertainties of worldly life. Ideal values are seen as being clearly realisable, raising human existence to the highest level of its nature, and bringing to it the stability which results from conformity with the divine Will as exercised through the moral law. As in Scholastic literary theory, there is no sense that the communication of moral norms, expressed in simple form, in any way conflicts with the imperative that they be practically applied. The *moralitas*' invitation to the audience to provide further particularisation of its *sententia*, and even to construct *sententia* of their own, indicates a faith in the human capacity to relate universals to particulars which suggests that the idealising and ethical imperatives of Scholastic theory are once again harmonised. Henryson is certainly more attentive to the practical as well as intrinsic value of moral imperatives than his Scholastic forebears. But he nevertheless expresses in this fable a conception of the relation between the universal and the particular which is free of the complications which develop as the later Middle Ages progresses, and which sees the Scholastic vision of literature reaffirmed.

Other aspects of 'The Lion and the Mouse', however, qualify its optimistic vision of literary representation and of social justice. The fable is unique in the collection in being set within the framing device of a dream. This suggests that the congruence between normative precepts and actual circumstances which it posits remains conjectural, its realisation seeming a distant and ephemeral prospect. Indeed, 'The Lion and the Mouse' in fact evokes an ideal of poetry in the face of which the rest of the *Fables* stands condemned. As Ian Jamieson has pointed out,

the *moralitas*' reading of the lion sleeping under a tree as an emblem of rulers who neglect their duties in pursuing worldly pleasures reflects also on the narrator, who himself falls asleep under a tree in the prologue. Similarly, the *moralitas*' description of the forest, which symbolises 'the warld and his prosperitie' (l.1582), applies the moral to the narrator's world as much as to the world of Aesop's narrative. In the tale, we are only told that the lion 'lay in the fair forest' (l.1408). The *moralitas*' reference to 'foulis sang and flouris ferlie sweit' (l.1581) supplies details which are drawn from the description of the forest in which the narrator walks and falls asleep in the prologue (ll.1321-41)[19]. In this respect, 'The Lion and the Mouse' accuses the narrator/poet himself of a worldliness of vision, and implicates the other fables in the collection in that worldliness.

'The Lion and the Mouse' thus directly associates the moral chaos which ensues from the failure to attain a relation of congruence between normative moral values and actual situations with the problems of poetic signification with which Henryson wrestles in fables such as 'The Two Mice'. The prudential function of poetry as defined in Scholastic literary theory, whereby it facilitates the relation of universals to particulars in moral understanding and action, is one which the *Fables* strives towards, but fails to achieve. Various literary strategies are proffered in an attempt to establish a mode of representation capable of establishing reference to universal norms and relating these cogently to particular circumstances. But invariably, each suggested mode is undermined by other aspects of the *Fables*. The collection constitutes a nexus of proposals, critiques, and counter-proposals which ultimately leaves judgement suspended and appears pessimistic as to the possibility of settling the questions which it addresses. Nor does 'The Lion and the Mouse' provide any satisfactory resolution of the difficulties. The fable, like the *Testament*, assumes a neat congruence between ideal virtues and the particular consequences of actions conducted in conformity with those virtues, but it fails to consider situations such as that depicted in 'The Two Mice', where concretising and idealising determinations of an action's significance conflict with one another. 'The Lion and the Mouse' provides no answers to the problems of representation which Henryson

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19. See I.W.A. Jamieson, 'Some Attitudes to Poetry in Late Fifteenth-Century Scotland', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 15 (1977-78), 28-42 (p.35).

faces. Rather, it presents a challenge, establishing the ideal of poetry which the fables must realise if they are to maintain any persuasive moral force. The actual literary difficulties which Henryson confronts in trying to achieve this mean that poetry appears as part of the problem, not as part of the solution.

One further significant aspect of 'The Lion and the Mouse' appears in the interplay between the differing claims as to its authorship, its being ascribed overtly to Aesop and covertly to the narrator. This suggests that Henryson considers the deficiencies of poetry which he depicts to be a product of his own age. In attributing the poem to Aesop Henryson associates his ideal of persuasive moral representation with the *auctoritas* of the ancients, presenting this *auctoritas* as something to which the modern writer should aspire. But in setting it within a dream, and having it comment adversely on the problematic status of the other fables in the collection, he suggests that such *auctoritas* is not easily emulated in his own day. It demands a capacity on the part of both poet and audience to grasp the relation between particular actions and the moral law which, as Aesop's own animadversions against the corruption of the narrator's epoch indicate, has been lost in the decadence of the modern age:

> 'Now in this warld me think richt few or nane
> To goddis word that hes deuotioun [...].
> Sa roustit is the warld with canker blak
> That now my taillis may lytill succour mak.'
> (ll.1391-97)

This suggests that at one time fables would indeed have had a positive effect, but that the capacity to respond positively to them has been lost. Indeed, even the capacity of modern writers to construct fables which can present a coherent moral vision in a manner capable of addressing the problems of the times is in doubt. ('The Lion and the Mouse' itself, of course, in its assumption of the unproblematic application of moral norms in actual circumstances, is ill-adapted to the *weltanschauung* of Henryson's age.)

'The Lion and the Mouse' again illustrates the intimate connection between literary, moral, and social questions in Henryson's work. The problems resulting from the lack of contiguity between universals and particulars, the ideal and the actual, which disable poetic signification and undermine the moral efficacy of literature are the same as those

which impede ethical judgement in general and lead to moral and social disorder. But the way in which Henryson consistently refers such disorder, and the fractured moral perception which produces it, back to problems of poetic signification makes it clear that questions regarding the epistemological status of literature are central to his ethical and social thought.

It is the textuality of poetry, the prominence of the signifier in its constitution, which leads Henryson to attribute to it the negative paradigmatic quality which it takes on in the *Fables*. The problems that the lack of proportion between universals and particulars produces, and which Henryson addresses and analyses so rigorously in terms of their literary, moral, and social implications, result in both abstractive and concretising modes of ethical judgement assuming a figmentary textual complexion. Both appear as partial, exclusory perspectives, generating significances which are distanced from the realities they purport to evaluate, being constituted through textualising processes of differentiation and prioritisation. Meaning takes on a fictive, constructed quality, which associates it with the artifice of a poetic language whose signings are once more felt to actively obstruct the mind's grasp of truth, rather than serving as instruments which facilitate it.

In the *Fables*, poetry has regained its early-medieval associations with a disruptive textuality which undermines meaning even as it is posited. But the destabilisation of meaning which Henryson associates with poetry appears in a form which is particular to Henryson's post-Nominalist milieu. The text presents an interference between *sententiae* derived from structurations which privilege either its syntagmatic or paradigmatic axes. This produces a tension between discrete levels of meaning, established on the level of narrative syntax and through prior reference, which causes both to appear as a relative construct, each foregrounding the other's exclusions and limitations. This differs from the early-medieval perception of the literary text as distracting from a proper consideration of the relation of meaning to ideal truth through its ornate language and fictionality. Henryson insists that the teachings and tenets which a text presents must be attuned to both the absolute and the contingent dimensions of the actions of which they are predicated. The difficulty involved in combining these results in a destabilisation of poetic meaning which is much more radical and far-reaching than in the early-

medieval conception. Being symptomatic of a disorder which is endemic in moral judgement in general, it leaves little possibility of stepping outside the realm of textuality to arrive at a clear perception of the true nature of reality.

But for all that the breach between sign and referent which the *Fables* depicts and embodies is of general application and has a distinctive late-medieval configuration, Henryson's commitment to Scholastic theory leads him to construe that breach as being first and foremost a property of literary signification, and its more widespread effects as an extension of a disruptive potential inherent in literature. As has already been pointed out with regard to 'The Cock and the Jasp' and 'The Trial of the Fox', Henryson is well aware of the inherently disruptive effects of poetic language and of the dangers of its exceeding the limits of the instrumental role defined for it in Scholastic literary theory (above, Ch.3, pp.124-25). Fables such as these show that the value he places on the idealising heuristic tendency of Scholasticism is founded on a clear recognition of the dangers of privileging the particular formulations of the text as the prime determinant of its significance. To read in such a manner is to undermine the authority of whatever meaning is posited, presenting it as defined merely by accidents of context and perspective, and lacking in any relation to the substantial nature of the actions and incidents depicted. It is this sense of a disruptive potential intrinsic to poetic discourse which induces Henryson to construct poetry as the paradigm of a general destabilisation of moral perception. The collapse of the Scholastic model of literature and the development of the sense of the disproportionate relation between the ideal and the actual, are constructed as a general eruption of forces which had always been an implicit threat within literary discourse, so that a previously restricted poetic textuality now extends to encompass ethical judgement in general. The breakdown of the Scholastic conception of literature sees the return of the forces which the Scholastics sought to contain. The disruptive power of literature which aroused early-medieval suspicion thus reappears in Henryson's work in a greatly heightened form.

That the disintegration of the Scholastic model of literature should be imaged in terms derived from that same model testifies to Henryson's vast debt to Scholastic literary theory. The *Fables* shows Henryson's engagement with that theory to be profound, intensely clear-sighted, and

significant in ways which extend far beyond any narrow conception of literary concerns. His rigorous anatomising of the tensions which have by his time developed between the affective and idealising imperatives of Scholastic theory testifies to the critical character of his engagement with that theory, as he subjects the conventional Scholastic protocols to an interrogation which ruthlessly exposes their incapacity to fulfil the ethical function assigned to them. Henryson's creative deployment of the resources of Scholastic theory, which he adapts and modifies, tapping their transformative potential in an attempt to develop new modes of signification, further testifies to the creativity and independence of mind with which he uses traditional materials.

At the same time, Henryson remains deeply committed to the Scholastic vision of literature. His creativity is motivated by the desire to reconcile the two conflicting axes of Scholastic theory in order to maintain the key aspects of its definition of literature in an environment where their combination has become highly problematic. The tensions between the different modes of signification which prevent Henryson's writings from ever settling into any stable synthesis are structured by a desire to see both the affective and idealising prerequisites of Scholasticism fulfilled. This unstinting desire persists even when the incompatibility of these imperatives impedes Henryson's capacity to provide any cogent form of moral representation. These aspects of his work demonstrate the strength of his commitment to the imperatives of Scholastic theory, which provide the underlying motivation for even the most innovatory features of his work. What Henryson derives from the Scholastics is not a set of normative literary protocols. Rather it is a set of problems and resources which ensure that he approaches Scholastic theory as a dynamic system. His Scholastic inheritance motivates and facilitates the development of a diverse range of literary strategies, prompting and enabling an experimental approach which generates literary attitudes and modes of representation that often depart radically from established medieval conventions.

Henryson's analysis of problems of moral representation also indicates his awareness that the problems posed for him by Scholastic literary theory raise issues which are more than merely aesthetic, but which reflect more broadly on problems of ethical judgement and of social justice. The semiotic difficulties raised in Henryson's work not only

disrupt the coherence of poetic representation. They also forestall the possibility of establishing order and equity in society and impede moral judgement in a manner which has deleterious consequences in both spiritual and material terms. The collapse of Scholastic literary theory brings to light semiotic quandaries which are at the root of more general moral and social problems. These quandaries ultimately revolve around the epistemological status of literature, whose textuality embodies for Henryson, to an even greater degree than for early-medieval thinkers, a destabilisation of meaning which undermines all established principles of order, even those according to which its own representations are constructed.

This is not, however, to say that Henryson's work should be deemed a failure. Certainly, Henryson appears deeply frustrated over the difficulty of arriving at any coherent form of moral representation, in literature or elsewhere. The *Fables* maintains a persistent emphasis on the imminence of a divine judgement for which humanity's fractured moral understanding leaves it ill-prepared. This paints a pessimistic picture, and one which clearly views the failures of poetry in a negative light. But considered as an anatomy of the factors which produce the dissolution of Scholastic literary theory and result in the collapse and abandonment of established medieval modes of signification, Henryson's work is massively impressive in its acuity and insight. Faced with a crisis of representation which not only undermines the conceptual categories which shape his understanding of literature, but also threatens his whole conception of moral and social order, Henryson squarely confronts and works through the problems, attempting to resolve them while refusing any retreat into evasiveness or oversimplification. That no coherent vision emerges from his work is not a flaw. It is testimony to the rigour of Henryson's interrogation of the Scholastic conception of literature, and to the clarity with which he perceives and articulates the implications of the semiotic issues at stake in both the constitution and disintegration of that conception.

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